リナVSオーフェン

ILLUSTRATOR
RUI ARAIZUMI & YUUYA KUSAKA

Slayers Vs Orphan

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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Chapter 1: Encounter

".....What are you?"

That was all I meant by it.

I didn't even feel like asking his name—it was obvious, without even digging through my past memories, that he wasn't a face I knew. In the first place, I didn't even have confirmation whether it was a man or what.

I just meant it in that sense.

[.....]

The man, who had been about to pass by me as if nothing had happened, muttered only that much and stopped with a frown. That reaction seemed, if anything, rather human.

In silence, I observed him.

I didn't know what use they were in a deserted city, but the streetlights were glowing, blurring faintly into the fog that refused to lift. The night sky was dark, and the alleys sandwiched between stone walls cast a shadows like they had been painted over with ink, but the light from the streetlamps cut through it at an angle.

While staring at him—

Actually, I was looking at myself. I couldn't truly see myself, of course, but somehow the image of my own face surfaced in my mind: standing in the darkness, clenching a lit cigarette between my lips. It might have been a special power held by the darkness, a nightmare-like psychological pressure, or perhaps just an illusion, but there wasn't much difference between them. Thanks to the familiar black double-breasted coat draped over my shoulders, I managed to avoid feeling most of the fog's chill. I thought it was a good thing I had worn thick stockings. When I got cold, moving became a chore.

I pinched the cigarette with my fingertips and pulled it from my mouth. Usually, I just lit a cigarette and kept it in my mouth without ever really smoking it. I believed it was a form of quitting, though I remembered that no one around me had ever agreed with that.

[.....]

The man also stared back at me in silence. Returning his gaze, looking into eyes that had a dull, gem-like luster, I felt as if I were seeing his true form for the first time. I could only describe it as monstrous. Any certainty that he might be human wavered easily once I saw the brilliance of an extremely sharp intelligence shining within those dull-colored eyes. His grayish cloak didn't quite manage to hide his abnormality.

But that might have only meant that he wasn't a beast. His voice was low, as if suppressed, partly due to his mask. He let out a mumbled mutter.

".....Do you want something?"

"I wonder if there are a lot of people like you in this city."

Looking around at the stone-built alley, I added:

"It seems like there isn't a single soul around, though."

"Who knows."

He gave a shrug. Beneath the hood pulled low over his eyes, I saw hair with a bluish tint—seemingly different from mere animal fur—sway unnaturally.

"I've never been to this city... no, a city like this, either."

"You're even carrying a sword?"

Men were creatures poor at hiding things. While thinking that idly, I noticed the obvious presence of a grandiose weapon beneath his cloak. Or perhaps he wasn't even trying to hide it.

"So it was your doing after all!"

Along with the shout, the sound of cutting wind echoed through the fog.

On a fog-shrouded afternoon cafe terrace, a ringing voice suddenly resounded.

Only two women, around twenty years old, were sitting at a table. A white mass that fell from the roof pulverized one of the nearby tables.

Clatter.

A moment later, another mass fell onto the cobblestones.

".....Ow, ow, ow... Hey, Amelia..... why did I have to jump down too?"

".....It was your doing!"

Pressed again by the voice—

"Huh?"

The two of them finally realized that the words were directed at them.

However, even when they interrupted their conversation and looked around, they saw nothing but unoccupied tables lined up, shrouded in thin fog.

I couldn't recall it well.

Silence lingered. The fog drifted, distorting the light of the streetlamps. I lightly touched the ends of my long, straight black hair, which had absorbed the moisture. I had done it unconsciously, but it was a gesture I hated. My belief was that all women who touched their hair when it wasn't necessary were incompetent—I, Dorothy Maggie Hauser—

".....So, what are you?"

I muttered toward the man again.

[.....]

[.....]

[...]

We looked at each other in silence.

"It's no use playing dumb!"

While saying that, the man who had fallen—or rather, dropped—later was the first to pick himself up. He was a man in his early twenties, with long blond hair, armed with a breastplate and a long sword.

"What are you saying, Mr. Gourry! When you appear before a stranger in a strange situation like this, didn't you learn that this is the common way to do it!?"

The white mass that picked itself up while speaking was a girl about fifteen or sixteen years old with black hair, wearing whitish clothes.

[.....]

The sisters stared silently for a while at the two who had dropped in. Suddenly noticing something, they glanced around restlessly.

".....What? Where is this?"

They muttered, noticing the abnormality as if only just now.

However, the girl who had dropped down, Amelia, didn't care about that at all. She pointed a finger sharply at the two of them.

"The heart of justice burning in my arm, my soul! It feels the presence of evil lurking behind this abnormal situation! And since for the time being you two are the only ones to be found in this city, that means it's you!"

[.....]

Having it declared so clearly and decisively while she held her "signature pose"—

The sisters thought for a moment in silence and then, also in silence, pointed together.

Specifically, toward Gourry.

Even in the silence, their gaze spoke volumes: 'There are other people here, aren't there?'

Amelia froze in her pointing pose for a while. After a small "Ahem," she said:

".....As I thought, it's not good to jump to conclusions rashly."

Though she finally lowered her finger, she kept her eyes fixed on them and spoke out,

somehow with great dignity.

This was a place that neither Amelia nor Gourry recognized.

It didn't mean it was a city they were visiting for the first time. They simply didn't understand the process or the reason why they were here. Amelia, having sensed the abnormality, tried to bluff the two sisters she found, thinking they might be the masterminds... but apparently, she was wrong.

The sisters spoke in whispers loud enough to be heard:

"Hey, Bonnie, what do you think that is?"

"It fell, Sister Coggie."

"I wonder if it's a junior high student in the middle of an escape."

"What about that man over there?"

"That's probably... a kidnapping..."

After exchanging such conversation, they stared intently at Gourry.

".....A junior high student.....?"

Amelia frowned at the unfamiliar term, but again, she didn't let it bother her much.

"Are you people from this city?"

While she asked that, Gourry muttered softly while scratching his head:

".....I mean... where is this?"

At those words, the sisters—Coggie in her suit and Bonnie in her dress—exchanged a look for an instant, then glanced around restlessly.

".....Who knows..... This isn't... Totokanta, is it?"

"The royalties we ordered haven't arrived yet, either. Waiter, are you not here?"

They muttered one after another.

Drawn by this, Gourry also looked around.

"I'm sure I was walking along the highway....."

"I might have climbed a tree, or maybe I didn't....."

Amelia crossed her arms for a while, thought it over, and said:

"That means... it's not your city, then."

The whole group fell into a troubled silence, letting their gazes wander through the air for a moment.

The gazes of the group stopped dead at a certain point.

Was that thing there until just a moment ago?

No one could voice the question that crossed their minds, as it seemed too ridiculous.

The fog-covered cafe terrace. It was located on a slight elevation, and if the fog had cleared, it probably would have been a perfect spot to view the stone-built cityscape.

Beyond the fog—beyond the deserted city where stone walls continued like a maze—stood a black mass, cloaked in an even deeper mist.

A massive...

"A castle....."

Following Coggie, who muttered in a daze, Bonnie also spoke:

"Castles are only in the Royal Capital..... but..."

And then the two of them said at the same time:

"Where is this.....?"

A meaningless, brief silence fell.

"I see, I've figured it out!"

It was Amelia who broke the silence, raising her voice. Looking at the two sisters, Coggie and Bonnie, she cried out:

"You two also found yourselves here before you knew it!"

Amelia's hand gripped Coggie's shoulder firmly—the latter having nodded thoughtlessly.

"That means! Now is the very time for us to join forces and stand against the giant evil that created this situation!"

".....Wasn't the plan to look for everyone and get some food.....?"

Gourry's muttered words were ignored.

---However, Coggie did not ignore those words.

"Everyone? Do you have other companions?"

She asked the girl, trying somehow to change the subject, as she felt she was about to be dragged into something unnecessary. As she spoke, she was being shaken meaninglessly by the shoulders.

Amelia responded, the veins popping on her clenched fist:

"That's right! There are two more companions gathered to defeat evil!"

Gourry just let the line pass—the kind of line that would have drawn an immediate retort if the "other two" had heard it.

Coggie felt deeply that this was the type of person she shouldn't get involved with. She stared into space for a moment and tried saying something random.

".....Um, listen, little girl. I don't really know what's going on, but your guardians will be worried if you don't go home. Probably."

"Go home..... how?"

It was Gourry, not Amelia, who asked back the difficult-to-answer question.

"Well, I don't know."

"Isn't it obvious!?"

Amelia raised her voice, pointing a finger at Coggie from point-blank range.

"We have to do something about this chaotic situation—in other words, we just have

to defeat the evil! Unless we do that, there is no future for us! So, you should just give up and act like you were bitten by a dog, and quietly light the fire of justice in your heart!"

"Uuuugh. Such a miserable fate....."

Knowing that escape was now impossible, Coggie was on the verge of breaking down in tears when she suddenly made a face as if she had remembered something important she had forgotten, and muttered softly.

".....But we have to get back to Totokanta soon, too. If we leave my sister unleashed, there might be casualties among the civilians....."

"But how are we to return?"

"It's simple!"

Hearing Bonnie's mutter, Amelia pointed into the distance as if she had exactly what she wanted.

"Now then!"

"The source of all calamity, the root of all evil! Things like that are usually in a place like that! If we just defeat that, everything will be fine!"

At the tip of her straightly extended finger—

The castle shrouded in mist stood looming darkly.

Orphen muttered with his arms crossed.

"What is this?"

In this situation where no one else was around, it might have been meaningless to speak aloud to himself—but there was nothing else he could do.

What is this?

He repeated it in his mind.

In the twenty years or so he had lived, many things had happened. Among them were

life crises, life-path crises, and he couldn't help but feel that many meaningless crises had been included as well, but in any case, there had been such things. He had overcome them, and that was how he became who he was now.

He touched the pendant on his chest almost unconsciously and closed his eyes. A one-legged dragon entwined around a sword. He held onto his self-control as the sensation of that emblem pressed into his palm. Realizing that he was more agitated than he thought, he let out a sigh. The emblem was the mark of one who had studied at the pinnacle of Continental Black Magic, the "Tower of Fang." It was a proof of power.

Would such a thing be of any use? In this place?

He raised his right arm. He concentrated his consciousness, imagining everything around him, including himself; trapping it in the image, weaving it into the image. Confident that he had woven a perfect composition, he muttered:

"I create the tiny spirits."

I am the point of light.....

A pale blue light surfaced within the fog. A blurred mass of light made the tones of the mist even more complex.

He let out a sigh. While aware that it was largely mixed with relief, he said:

".....Well, it's not like I'm completely powerless."

He looked around once more.

To tell the truth, it wasn't really necessary to go through the trouble of calling forth a light. Though the entire view was covered in fog, it was a time that couldn't even be called evening yet. The streetlamps standing here and there were not lit. The alleys had sharp ups and downs like the swells of waves and were eerily silent. He leaned over and rubbed the ground with his finger, but there wasn't even the sensation of dust.

He looked up. Not so far away in the distance, a massive dark shadow towered. Looking at the numerous spires that the fog couldn't completely hide, he muttered quietly:

".....A castle..... maybe?"

"It would appear so."

Orphen turned around with a start. He instinctively took a combat stance, but what leaped into his field of vision as he spun 180 degrees was a familiar face.

Silver hair swept back, a tuxedo without a single wrinkle—with an elegant manner, he placed the tips of his white-gloved fingers to his chin and stretched his gaze straight toward that castle.

Grateful for the combat stance he had taken reflexively, Orphen thrust his fist out just like that.

"Kei..... sss!"

Catching that fist with his left hand, the man—Keith—kept his pose looking up at the castle and merely turned his gaze toward Orphen. He muttered in a quiet tone:

"Why is that?"

"What do you mean, 'why'!?"

Orphen shouted as he pulled back his fist. He continued.

"Listen!"

He pointed around randomly at the surrounding area.

"Abnormality!"

Then, he pointed his finger directly at Keith.

"And you!"

"Yes."

"Now that the evidence is all gathered, what else could it be but your doing!? So, change it back right now—change it back, put it back, put everything back to how it was!"

"I say, even if you speak of such things to me..."

Keith finally broke his pose and spoke as if he were troubled. Mind you, his expression

and tone remained completely unchanged; therefore, the only reason he sounded "troubled" was purely because of the words themselves.

It wasn't that I was particularly irritated by that fact, but I raised my voice even further.

"Then what is it!? An abnormal situation occurs and you happen to be here—how could it possibly *not* be your doing!?"

Advancing exactly that much, Keith continued. He held up a single index finger.

"Master Sorcerer, please consider it this way first. Where were you, Master Sorcerer, before you came to this place?"

"Where...? Well, I had nothing better to do, so I was taking a nap in my room at the inn, and when I woke up, I was in a place like this—"

"I see. A stray dog's life that exceeds all rumors. Let us name you 'Pochi'."

"Hey!"

"However, Master Sorcerer, do you wear your shoes and gloves when you sleep?"

"Forget about that, right now—"

I started to say.

"Oh, I see..."

It seemed he understood.

"I see. It's a dream."

I said.

In that instant.

Orphen spun around quickly and caught a silver flash that appeared at the edge of his vision. To be precise—I caught the wrist of the tuxedoed arm that had made that silver flash.

"Ah, Master Sorcerer. Please wait a moment."

He restrained me with his hand.

".....What are you planning.....? Keith."

While somehow holding down that arm which was filled with grinding strength, I growled the words through gritted teeth.

[.....]

Keith suddenly stopped talking. He knitted his brows as if he had noticed something.

"Master Sorcerer, please listen carefully!"

"I am!"

Keith suddenly shouted back in a loud voice. I was startled by the eerie echo reflecting off the stone alleyways, and I stepped back half a pace.

[.....]

As I looked up blankly, Keith started talking to himself as if he were having a conversation with something invisible beside him.

"Eh?"

He seemed surprised.

"I see."

He seemed convinced.

"Understood. A pigeon delivery... what a sounding idea. Well then, regarding the loan..."

With that, the conversation seemed to be concluded. He glanced over here, cleared his throat, and said:

"Well then, Master Sorcerer, on that note, until we meet again."

"Hey!"

"Gooood-byyyyyye."

"Like I'd let you get away!?"

I started running, chasing after Keith as he skipped nimbly along the top of the stone wall.

In the fog, only the sound of footsteps hitting the cobblestones echoed. Strangely, the alley had no forks, and even when Keith's retreating figure blurred into the mist, it seemed I didn't need to worry about losing my way—at least, not on this path.

I hadn't been running for that long. Rather, my sense of time became rapidly ambiguous to the point where I couldn't even estimate the distance I had covered. Keith's figure had long since vanished. The only footsteps I could hear were my own. Just as I was beginning to feel a sense of motion sickness from the three-dimensionally undulating alleyways—

I stopped.

"Hm.....?"

Before I knew it, the ground beneath my feet had become flat. Even though no wind had blown, the fog was being swept away. The black veil was torn apart, and what appeared in my cleared vision was a wide space paved with stone. Without realizing it, the castle was now looming close enough that I could estimate its distance with my eyes. Perhaps it was a park; I could see a fountain in the center. I had no idea what meaning a place of rest held in a deserted city. A park that held the same meaning as a monologue. Thinking about such things, I grimaced. In the end, there was nothing that would answer my questions.

A hollow, fabricated silence...

I could hear the sound of the fountain's water echoing futilely. But compared to the overwhelming quiet of the entire city, that slight sound was something I almost forgot I was hearing. This deserted city was drowning out the sounds of reality.

What was this?

I knew for certain that it wasn't a dream, despite what Keith had said. I looked down fearfully at my left arm.

I had noticed it while I was running. When Keith had shaken off my hand, the blade must have grazed me. I shook my head as I pressed my hand against the throbbing

wound. Blood was seeping from the jagged gash.

If I felt pain, it wasn't a dream. I didn't necessarily believe in such simple logic, but...

The pain. The sensation of losing blood as it flowed out. The coldness of sweat mixing with the fog. My heart racing from the long run. My confused head. My muddied will—

It wasn't a dream. I was certain of it, and I felt a sharp chill run down my spine. It wasn't a dream. And yet, something was happening. Something extraordinarily abnormal.

"I heal—"

I started to whisper, intending to close the wound.

I stopped halfway. I felt a presence. Even though the fog in this area had thinned somewhat, the entire city was still shrouded. I felt as if something was about to appear from beyond that mist, and I turned around.

The beginning was a scene you could find anywhere.

A girl taking a somewhat late lunch alone in a small diner in town, and several thug-like men picking a fight with her for various reasons—

Truly, a scene you could find anywhere.

The only slight differences were that the girl being hassled looked like a mage draped in a cloak, and that her attitude was incredibly calm.

It wasn't often you saw a scene where another person was nonchalantly eating food at a table that someone else had just vacated. Following the men who were making demands, the girl left the shop with them—

"It's not 'What a coincidence'!!"

"Then why don't you just order something extra?"

Thump!

Crash!

At Naga's words, I finally relaxed my shoulders a bit.

A single explosive sound.

"Gah!"

[.....W-well, that's true, but.....]

After a short pause, only one girl returned to the shop with light steps.

I had been frozen for a moment, but then, with my auburn hair fluttering, I delivered a drop-kick across the table right into the middle of the opponent's forehead!

"And so, ma'am! I'll take one more order of the special-grade skirt steak, please~♪"

In my hand was a wallet that I had plundered—no, involuntarily requisitioned as mental alimony—from the men. It didn't feel very heavy.

Up to this point, well, I wouldn't say it was common, but it certainly wasn't a rare sight. In this world where magic was rampant, everyone knew that numerical superiority or physical strength didn't necessarily mean an absolute advantage.

".....Ngh."

With a dull *thud*, the wallet fell from my hand to the floor.

The table where I had been sitting just a moment ago.

The table that had been piled high with the shop's signature dishes, which I had been hogging all to myself.

Someone else was sitting there now.

They were elegantly wielding a knife and fork, carrying the last piece of the meat dish that had just been served to their mouth—

"Oh, Lina. What a coincidence."

They said it shamelessly after swallowing that bite.

Spiky shoulder guards and a skull necklace around the neck.

Standing over the fallen, screaming opponent, looking down arrogantly—

"You, Naga! I haven't seen you around for a while, so I thought for sure you'd become ant food! To come crawling back now of all times..... wait, WHAAAAAAAT!!"

I screamed as I looked at the table.

My gaze was fixed on the plate of meat that Naga had just finished emptying. My eyes were filled with murderous intent as I glared at her.

".....Hey... that dish was this shop's number one recommendation.....!"

Sensing the seriousness of my murderous intent, she hurriedly stood up, though she still let a tone of composure bleed into her voice.

".....Hmph..... And here I was wondering what you were going to say....."

Every customer in the shop clearly felt the temperature drop several degrees.

From my side, as I stood with one hand still raised to order—

I heard a sound like something snapping.

And then. It happened in the blink of an eye.

"GYAAAAAAAAAH!"

Naga flew out of the shop's entrance—

KABOOM!

An explosion erupted from inside the shop.

The flames and smoke wavered, and from deep within, a black silhouette emerged.

A smile on the lips. Murderous intent in the eyes.

The grudge over the special skirt steak was deeper than the sea.

White filled my vision.

I glared at Naga's retreating back as she fled across the street.

"Ray Wing!"

Whoosh!

I kicked the air, unleashed the high-speed flight spell, and gave chase!

Perhaps sensing a presence behind her, she looked back over her shoulder—Naga's face contorted. She seemed to be hurriedly chanting some spell, but a half-hearted attack spell wouldn't work against this technique that enveloped me in a barrier of wind for high-speed flight.

Naga suddenly changed course and dove into a side alley.

She likely intended to use the maze-like narrow alleys to escape—

".....I see....."

I muttered softly.

It was impossible to keep flying in this visibility. I hurriedly canceled the spell and—

Thud!

I landed on the cobblestones.

What filled the narrow, maze-like alley was—

A thin fog.

I knew there was a spell called *Vaporizing Fog*. This was probably the identity of the spell Naga had been chanting earlier. It was a spell that simply generated fog, but it was quite effective when used as a distraction during a retreat. For example, right now. She might be using the fog as a distraction to widen the gap between us, or she might be hiding somewhere quietly, waiting for me to pass by.

"Too easy!"

I roared, controlling the spell through sheer willpower and my grudge, and changed my flight trajectory in a single breath!

I headed straight into the back alley where Naga had fled!

I expected to catch up in no time.

"But as usual..... your follow-through is weak."

The moment I dove into the alley, I said it and took a deep breath.

—The scent of grilled meat wafting in the fog.

It led toward the other side of the alley.

"---You're not getting away!"

I started running.

I dashed between the stone walls towering on both sides, chasing the lingering scent in the fog. The alley remained a single path, twisting and turning to the right and left—

Suddenly.

The view opened up.

At the same time, the scent of the meat dispersed.

I leaped out onto a somewhat larger street—

[.....]

I let out a small cry despite myself.

A thin fog drifted everywhere. Naga was nowhere to be seen.

No, not just Naga—even the townspeople who had been overflowing in the streets were gone.

It wasn't just the people who had vanished. The familiar scenery of the town had also changed.

A deserted city. However, it certainly wasn't a ruin. The cobblestones and buildings were well-maintained, as if they had just been cleaned.

—Is this some kind of illusion?

Thinking this, I took off my right glove and gently touched a nearby wall. But what was transmitted to my palm was the cold sensation of stone, exactly as it appeared.

If so—this was unmistakably reality.

".....What does this mean?"

I muttered, looking around once more.

This was a different city. Even the distant clamor that every city has was absent here.

Houses of somewhat gloomy stonework. Rows of stone walls that seemed to reject visitors made the city look like a maze. And beyond the mist sat a massive, dark silhouette.

".....A castle.....?"

I muttered as I looked up, then began walking toward it. I didn't have any proof. I just had a hunch. A feeling that if I went this way, I'd find something.

Moving around recklessly while I didn't understand the situation wasn't the best plan. But standing still in this place wouldn't help me understand, either.

Only my footsteps echoed through the foggy city—on the stone alleys—and were swallowed by the white void.

Quiet. Just a quiet, deserted—

Suddenly.

I stopped.

My ears, straining while I even held my breath, caught a faint sound.

This way!!

I started walking again. I quickened my pace a bit more than before. In the direction where the sound came from. It was getting louder—closer.

The sound of flowing water.

Naturally, my pace quickened. I passed through the alley, and my field of vision opened up suddenly. Was it my imagination that even the lingering fog seemed to retreat for a moment?

—A square.

Only the fountain in the center continued to copiously produce the sound of flowing water I had heard earlier. In a normal city, it wouldn't be strange to see an old man feeding pigeons, but here, there wasn't even the sight of a gathering bird.

I didn't have much to go on; it was just a premonition.

She answered me.

"There are fountains in Totokanta too. If no one's maintaining them, things like this usually stop, don't they?"

The city spent a budget every year that was no joke just to keep them running. He looked up, directing a question to the girl who was steadily tracking him with her eyes.

"That means someone's looking after it, right?"

"Right..... isn't it?"

The girl thought for a while, considering the possibilities.

"I'm here. And you were here too... which means there's a good chance other people are around... I mean, for example... maybe martial law was declared and everyone's holed up in their houses..... just as an example, of course."

She looked around as if searching for something. However, I didn't know if she was actually seeking what she asked for. There was no scent of dinner being prepared, nor any smoke drifting about—things that should exist in a city at this hour.

"Martial law..... or, wiped out by a plague....."

Orphen groaned, as if muttering to himself. But he shook his head.

"No. Everything is wrong. It’s not just that there are no people here. It's like they never existed at all."

He dropped his knees to the ground and stroked the cobblestones with his hand. He had done the same thing earlier, but the result here was exactly the same. Smooth as glass. Not a scratch, not even a speck of dust. It was as if no one in the world had ever passed through here. Or—as if it had been created this very moment. I added that thought in my mind.

".....Hey... don't say creepy things like that..... I mean, sure, it's strangely

clean, but... this city....."

She looked around and gave a light wave of her hand, as if trying to shake off an unpleasant thought.

"For example, maybe they built it in advance to move the capital. Either way, there's no way there are absolutely no people."

(*Well, that's true.*)

If I thought about it logically, I knew what I was saying didn't make sense. And yet, that underlying illogicality refused to leave my head. I didn't intend to be irritated by it, but I continued.

"There *should* be people. A city is a man-made object. To build this place, someone had to be here. So why do I feel no trace of them?"

Then, remembering, I added:

"By the way, my companion—well, not really, but I've already regretted the fact that he's entered the category of 'acquaintance,' though it's too late for that—anyway, there was a guy with hair like this and a face like this here until just a second ago. You didn't see him?"

Using my hands to roughly gesture a hairstyle and facial shape, I asked her. Watching me, the girl replied:

"No..... I was being bothered while eating by an acquaintance I don't really want to be friends with, and while I was chasing her, I ended up here before I knew it..... From that point on, I haven't seen anyone."

"What kind of distance is that? Isn't that weird?"

(*Yeah, in the end, that's what it comes down to. It's weird.*)

What I had seen, what I was seeing, where I had been, and where I was now.

After speaking up to that point in a somewhat heavy tone, her expression changed as if she had found a lead.

".....Wait, but that means there *are* people with faces like that? Here."

"Who knows. Knowing him, if I start expecting something like that even a little, he'll

start saying, 'Actually, let's just pretend I wasn't here,' and I wouldn't even be surprised if he actually ceased to have been there. In fact, he's just that kind of guy—ah, no, don't mind me."

I saw the girl grimace; she probably didn't understand what I was talking about. Not that I blamed her.

".....Who in the world..... is that...? But honestly, if I don't do something, I won't even be able to finish my meal....."

Listening to her mutter half to herself, Orphen fell into a vague contemplation. He glanced at the fog that blocked his vision and asked a sudden question.

"Hey, are you good at something like a full marathon?"

She clearly didn't understand the meaning and looked blankly at me. Her large eyes turned into dots as she stared.

Orphen continued.

"I was taking a nap, and when I woke up, I was on the street near here. You say you came here chasing a friend. But where were you chasing them from when you got lost? All the way from outside this city? How far was that?"

Nothing made sense. Things that were absolutely impossible were happening as if they were perfectly normal. That was the situation.

"No, that's not a friend....."

She said with somewhat cold eyes.

"I don't have any idea about that either..... Anyway, if we don't find someone, we're not going to get anywhere."

With her gloved hand, she pointed to the castle standing like a dark mountain.

"How about we try going there?"

She seemed to be waiting for my reaction for the time being. I intended to say nothing and keep my expression unchanged, but she must have read something. She continued as if to persuade me.

"I've decided not to consider the plague theory for now..... Whether it's martial law

or a city under construction, if we go there, won't there be at least one or two people?"

"I'm not exactly looking forward to it."

Orphen confessed honestly.

"You know, right? I've never heard of a castle other than Essenbulvitz. No matter how you think about it, this isn't normal."

"......Essenbulvitz?"

This time—this place was not deserted.

Emerging from the alley on the opposite side of the fountain at the same time as Lina was a face she didn't recognize. He looked to be about twenty years old. He wore an unfamiliar costume, black from top to bottom.

In silence.

Their gazes locked.

Through the fountain and the mist that enshrouded the world.

Only the sound of the water—copious and continuous—remained.

He had some kind of pendant hanging from his neck, and he stared intently at Lina with a sharp gaze.

In the end—

The wind hadn't chased the fog away for very long. Once again, white lines began to blur the vision. Drawn by the sight of the girl's figure—which had appeared for a moment and was about to be clouded over again—Orphen instinctively took a step forward. In that instant, what he saw was fluffy, long auburn hair, large round eyes, and a solemn outfit that was clearly mismatched with those features. It all combined into a strange impression.

He tried to get closer, and the fog thinned again.

It wasn't because of the wind, but because she had also taken a step closer. Now that

her form was clear, she looked quite small.

The reason she looked solemn was because of the shoulder guards that made her small frame look even smaller, a thick black cloak, and a dagger hanging at her waist. One couldn't blame him for thinking she looked dangerous. He could tell her age was clearly below his, but at the very least, she didn't look like a normal student. It wasn't just the clothes. As she panted slightly and stared at him with a bit of a grimace, her gaze didn't seem to stem from fear or surprise. What the girl showed in her expression was confidence. Confidence in herself. A level of confidence a girl of that age wouldn't usually possess—or so it seemed to Orphen.

Hmm.....

Then what kind of life must a girl have led to possess such a thing?

The stone square was dyed in the sunken colors of the dim shadows cast by the fog. While the silent wind stirred the mist as if to tease them, the girl's high-pitched voice rang out.

"Who are you?"

At the voice of the wary girl, Orphen felt a strange sensation, as if being slightly overwhelmed, and let out a small groan.

"Who, you ask—"

He cleared his throat and started over.

"It's a bit much to ask the moment we run into each other."

He could feel his own wariness rising toward this unknown person he'd met in a deserted city. He muttered to himself without letting it out loud.

(.....*Is she an inhabitant of this city?*)

If so, he had no choice but to be cautious. He stole a glance at the massive structure—what looked like a castle—looming darkly beyond the fog. He had been led here by Keith. It was a place where nothing made sense.

(*But..... something's wrong..... something is different.....*)

He couldn't identify the source of that discomfort, but he couldn't pin the cause on

the person in front of him either. (Something's..... that black castle.)

While groaning inwardly, he immediately returned his gaze to the girl. He agonized over how to ask her; countless words circled and vanished in his head, but only one remained.

"And you?"

His lips opened easily, perhaps because they were moistened by the fog.

The girl also seemed to hesitate when asked. She was likely thinking the same thing—she wanted to know about him, but if she asked, she might have to talk about herself too. What should she say, and what should she try to find out?

I didn't know what kind of judgment she reached. She shifted her body slightly into a wary half-stance, her hand casually resting near her waist. Was it so she could draw a weapon at any time? Regardless—

"I'm..... well... I'm lost, I guess."

"Doesn't seem like there's a single soul here."

Orphen looked around and then turned back to her.

"I feel more like I was brought here than just being lost..... I've never seen a city like this, have you? You, are you from this city?"

At that, she knit her brows slightly.

"Then, you too..... ended up here without knowing why?"

"That's right."

He nodded as he muttered. The girl didn't look like she was lying. If so, at least she wasn't an inhabitant of this mysterious city. Had she been brought here just like him? Orphen continued while scratching the back of his head.

"Where is this? That’s a castle over there, right?"

He pointed to the black castle and asked. She looked up at the castle in a daze and groaned harshly. It sounded more like she was talking to herself.

"Yeah..... it's a castle..... I'm sure that wasn't there a moment ago,

though....."

In any case, the tension left her voice as she lowered her guard to some degree.

"I have no idea what's going on either. You said it's deserted, but I didn't see anyone in the area I came through either."

A castle. It wasn't that he had never seen one. Rather, the "Tower of Fang," where he had spent most of his life, was like a fortress. In the city of Alenhatam, they had renovated an old castle into a library and museum as a tourist attraction. He had been inside those as well.

But those were, in the end, not "castles."

In the Kiesalhima continent, there was only one castle. The one and only citadel of the royalty, from which the Aristocratic Federation ruled the continent. It went without saying that the shadow of the black fortress he was looking up at now was different from *that* castle.

Words leaked out of him before he knew it.

"Isn't it strange?"

He saw that the girl had heard him and returned her gaze to him. He continued.

"There's no way there are no people....."

Orphen groaned and turned back toward the fountain, which had not ceased its watery sound for a while. He approached it with long strides and peered in. The uniform stone material that made up this city—it looked familiar yet unfamiliar, an unnatural material—and the fountain built from it seemed to equalize even the sound of the water into something inorganic.

"It's creepy, I think."

He let out a sigh, and the ripples created by his touch on the water's surface looked more like a mere pattern than actual waves.

(*Am I just being neurotic.....?*)

He couldn't quite imagine a child being able to exchange opinions like this with someone they'd suddenly met in an unknown city. Regardless, if the conversation was

drifting, Orphen grimaced and tried asking to get a clue.

"Hey, what do you mean when you say 'castle'?"

"I mean..... a castle is a....."

She looked troubled at being asked something so obvious—or so it seemed. She appeared to have misheard him. It was like mishearing your own mother's name—but when he accidentally looked at the girl's face, she wasn't joking; her brow was furrowed as if she truly hadn't heard of it.

"I haven't heard much about them... is it in the Coastal States or something?"

"States?"

It wasn't a word he used often, but there were those who referred to autonomous cities as small nations. Since it was a phrasing often preferred by radical independence activists, a sense of wariness reflexively surfaced. Orphen shrugged.

"A castle is a castle. The name doesn't matter, but since when are there castles outside the Royal Capital?"

"What do you mean, a castle is a..."

Troubled, she pulled back the arm she had been using to point at the black castle and began counting on her fingers.

"I wouldn't say there are so many you could trip over them..... but you see them quite a bit here and there when you're traveling..... right?"

Then, she added somewhat tentatively:

"Um..... have you just never been outside the Royal Capital.....? When you say Royal Capital, are you from somewhere like Saillune or Dilss?"

Orphen looked up at the void for a moment—or rather, for quite a long time.

(.....*Is this girl incredibly ignorant of the world?*)

And yet, from her appearance, he didn't think so. Ignorance to the point of not even knowing about the Royal Capital, Mebelenst?

In that instant.

"---That kind of thing....."

"I think it's that kind of thing too....."

The conversation cut off abruptly.

With a feeling of being at a loss, Orphen rubbed his face. He quickly took a defensive stance. A sensation like goosebumps—though he couldn't quite call it unpleasant—ran through his body.

As he concentrated his awareness, things he could do for the time being surfaced in his mind without him even trying. Compared to stepping into a nonsensical city and continuing a nonsensical conversation, this was almost refreshing. A clear and distinct sensation. He actually welcomed the feeling of danger.

".....Did you hear something?"

".....Actually... they're here, aren't they?"

The girl groaned and began to pay attention to her surroundings with a practiced air.

The fog wafted. The night wind flowed. But—something was here. Right here.

Illuminated by the faintly transparent light of the streetlamps—and yet, nothing moved on the street.

".....You can tell too? That they're here? Something nearby.....?"

In the white silence, Lina was the first to speak.

"Yeah," the man replied casually.

He didn't know the number of the opponents. He was only sure it wasn't just one or two. Multiple presences were intermingled, stagnating and drifting along with the fog. For a moment, it was stirred up, and the field of vision opened.

In that instant.

In the silence, the night wind flowed—

And then. They saw them. The owners of those presences.

They were—clinging all over the buildings, on the roofs, on the walls—a multitude of insects the size of large dogs, staring intently at us without even a twitch!

"EEEEEK!?"

The two of them screamed at the same time and—

"I let loose the white blade of light!"

"Damu Brass!"

"Vibration Bullet!"

They unleashed attack spells in different directions!

Kaboom!

But!

The insects were caught in the blast, the magic exploding and shaking the air!

"What!?"

[.....]

The insects were flustered and scurrying about, but they didn't seem to have taken any damage at all! Following that, the spell Lina unleashed attacked the insects again!

"Then..... Flare Lance!"

The spear of fire caught the insects for certain, momentarily dyeing the night fog red!

And the man did the same.

"I crush the primitive silence!"

Gwa-boom!

He unleashed a technique Lina didn't know.

The huge explosion he caused by making space itself dance sent sparks flying and shook the buildings, swallowing the insects head-on.

However, both of those attacks did nothing more than slightly incite the insects' confusion.

"Is my magic weakening!?"

Lina said, aghast.

If it were just that it didn't work on the insects, that would be one thing, but the walls and roofs that should have been hit by the aftershocks didn't look damaged either.

"Or maybe....."

She muttered, turning her attention to the man.

He had been firing off some kind of spells for a while now, but those also didn't seem to be affecting the insects or the buildings.

He glared at the insects head-on, cursed, concentrated his consciousness, and wove together a magical composition.

"There's a limit to how hard you can be, isn't there!?"

"The image of the underworld in my left hand!"

[.....]

A black sphere, born from his hand, flew toward the center of the insects, tracing a parabolic arc.

".....? Was that just a spell chant.....?"

I couldn't help but raise my voice. Just now—he hadn't chanted a spell. He had activated a technique using nothing but "Words of Power." At least as far as I knew, that wasn't something a human could do.

Then, who on earth is he—?

But for now, I didn't have the luxury to think deeply about such things.

BAM!

The black sphere he had unleashed transformed into an extraordinary impact and

flames, trampling the surrounding area.

"Whoaaaa!"

I staggered from the aftereffects of the shock.

"Hey! If you're going to use a big move, tell me first...!"

I cut my words short.

"...Wait? Matter Disintegration!?"

I spat the words out as I saw him sink to his knees, a look of exhaustion bleeding through, and looked at the insects who were still just standing there, looking surprised.

".....Wait..... did that do absolutely nothing?? To these things!?"

I wasn't joking. Even if it was a technique I didn't know, I could tell that the shot he just fired was something quite serious. And yet—it had produced no more effect than a mere distraction.

The insects flustered about for a bit, but soon regained their composure and began to stare at the two of us intently once again.

"This is ridiculous."

"I've realized perfectly well that these things are ridiculous—"

I grabbed the collar of the man, who was groaning exhaustedly, and tried to pull him up.

"Then running away is also an option! Come on! Pull yourself together!"

"I want to pull myself together, but just wait a second!"

Somehow or other, the man slipped right through my hands.

"Wha?"

As I blinked in surprise, he snapped at me.

"Where are we supposed to run!?"

He gestured with his eyes to the insects that completely surrounded us.

"If there's no escape route, we'll just make one! *Beifis Bring!* Earth Spirit Way!"

Thwack! I slammed one hand onto the cobblestones—

".....Wait! It doesn't even work on the floor!?"

I stood up and let out a cry of shock. It was a technique to interfere with earth spirits and control the ground. I had intended to bore a tunnel and escape through it, but—the cobblestones remained perfectly unchanged, showing nothing but their flat surface.

"Even though they've been taking the brunt of light-heat waves and matter disintegration earlier, not a single roof tile is damaged. It's not just the ground, apparently."

He spoke dejectedly.

"What *is* this place!?"

I looked around at our surroundings.

".....If the ground's no good..... we have the sky! .....Though if they fly and chase after us, I'll probably have nightmares about it..."

".....Rather than that....."

At my words, he suddenly knit his brows.

"Why aren't they doing it right now?"

"Thinking about it, what is their goal in the first place.....?"

I looked over the insects.

"If you have something to say, say it clearly! ...I guess that's impossible....."

The air stirred.

As if reacting to those words, the insects began to buzz. And then, like a receding tide on a beach—

Zazazazazazaaaaa!

Making a sound of footsteps that truly resembled the sound of waves, they retreated and vanished from our sight all at once.

[.....]

".....Did they run away?"

Left behind, the two of us muttered in a daze.

"Why..... so suddenly.....? What on earth.....?"

He let out a sigh.

"Animals sometimes get surprised and run away just from being counterattacked, even if it wasn't effective."

He looked over at me as he spoke.

".....So, you were a sorcerer? Not that I noticed."

"You too, for that matter..... but your sorcery is...."

I started to say, then trailed off. The sorcery he was using was different from what I knew. What on earth did that mean? While I was hesitating on how to bring up the question—

"Did you happen to encounter them?"

The presence and the voice emerged from deep within the fog simultaneously. We both turned toward the castle, the source of the voice.

Fog curled upon the street.

"You must not. You must not get involved with those sorts of creatures."

The fog wavered as the voice approached, its form thickening. It took on the silhouette of a man. A small shadow emerged from the white murk.

He was a man with an appearance far too mundane to be encountered in a situation like this. A middle-aged man of medium build, wearing an inconspicuous gray suit. If you passed him on the street, you probably wouldn't even notice him—he was a man

who looked like the very picture of mediocrity.

"Those sorts? I mean... who are you?"

Beside him, as he stood warily in silence, I questioned the man. Being asked, the man gave a respectful—or rather, excessively polite—bow.

"I am one who serves Lord Voim. Master Orphen and Mistress Lina, correct?"

"Wha.....?"

Startled by our names being called out so suddenly and accurately, I let out a cry.

"Who's this 'Orphen' person you're talking about?"

He feigned ignorance, sending me a meaningful sideways glance. However, even at that, the mundane man didn't show even a shred of agitation.

"You jest. My lord knows everything," he said flatly, his tone unchanged.

[.....]

Realizing that haggling wouldn't work, he—Orphen—fell silent. Whether taking that silence as an affirmation or simply not caring, the man continued in the same tone.

"In any case, there is no point in standing about talking in a place like this. It is not impossible that those creatures might return and cause a rude interruption. I wonder, might you both be willing to grace my lord's castle with your presence? We can prepare at least some warm soup immediately."

I looked at Orphen in silence. To be honest, I was a little tempted by the words "warm soup," but...

Receiving my gaze, Orphen turned back to the man. In truth, he had also just woken up and was hungry.

"If you'll answer this question, I might go."

He paused for a beat.

"What on earth is this city? I'm not interested in being guided by someone who can't answer that."

As we both watched intently—

"Yes."

The man answered so simply it was almost disappointing.

"This city is the city of my lord, Lord Voim."

Of course—we hadn't been expecting such a nonsensical answer.

"Who is this Voim?"

"Yes."

To Orphen's repeated question, the man again replied simply.

"Lord Voim is my master."

"No..... I mean, what *kind* of master....."

I let out a muttered retort despite myself. But one thing was clear: talking to this man here probably wasn't going to get us anywhere.

Sigh.

Orphen let out a long breath and shook his head fruitlessly.

"Doesn't seem like we're going to get a conversation out of him."

".....What do you think? Should we go?" I said to him in a low voice.

".....Following someone like this is definitely creepy, but..... I'm not in the mood to stay here and be surrounded by those insects again."

"I agree."

"Seriously, this place gives me the creeps....."

Orphen nodded unenthusiastically. Seeing this as a sign of consent, the man also gave a small nod.

"Then, would you be so kind as to follow me?"

The man turned his back and started walking toward the castle without waiting for a

response. Having no choice, we started walking after him.

".....So there *were* people here."

Orphen muttered softly. Whether the journey was short or long, I didn't know.

"Yeah....."

I started to nod in agreement, but then I cut myself off irritably.

"Hmm?"

".....Wait, maybe they're not..... people....."

Looking through the drifting fog as I said it, Orphen also peered into the distance. There wasn't just one person in the city. Besides the man walking in front of us, several others—or maybe more—who looked exactly the same were trudging along as if to walk in line with them, heading toward the castle.

—The same appearance—

The same plain gray suit, the same build, the same age, the same face.

"At this rate, I can't expect much from that 'warm soup' either..."

The conversation died out after my mutter, which was more of a monologue. After walking for an unknown distance, the man leading us stopped in front of a large gate. The others who had the same appearance as the man, and who had been walking alongside us, had either gone ahead or moved away; they had vanished before I realized it.

".....This way."

The man said with a polite bow, turning around to state the obvious. It was closer to a gate for a large mansion than a castle gate. It wasn't a crude, drawbridge-style gate that becomes a wall in an emergency, but rather a double door that seemed to emphasize appearance.

"Well, we're here....."

"What will be, will be."

Orphen followed up on my mutter, which contained a hint of regret, with a tone of

desperation. The man leading us didn't care; he turned on his heel again and started walking into the depths of the gate.

"Let's just hope the soup ingredients are normal, for now."

With my words as a cue, we followed after the man.

Creak...

Stirring up the fog and echoing only with a faint creak, the gate behind us closed off the way back—

Chapter 2: The "Look-Alike" Thing

It was so quiet and boring that I found myself wishing there was at least the sound of a clock ticking. Of course, it wasn't as if I could expect any improvement, so I just let out an irritable sigh. However, even that didn't make a sound, and the minor-key atmosphere didn't change at all.

I couldn't deny that the interior looked quite high-class. It wasn't even in bad taste. There was a red carpet where gold thread embroidery created a gentle contrast, and white tablecloths. The tablecloths were adorned with embroidery so exquisite you couldn't tell without touching it with your fingers, and they were thick enough that they wouldn't be pierced even if a child poked them with a fork to kill time.

The dining hall was plenty spacious, but one could also say that the space was simply a waste. There was a vase on a stand in the corner of the room. On the ceiling was a chandelier modeled after a sailing ship. The view outside the window was blocked by fog, and it would have been quite dark inside if not for the mysterious light emitted from that chandelier. I could easily imagine that each piece of furniture, and the collection as a whole, were all top-quality items. But the content was thin.

"This is really....."

I groaned, unable to bear it anymore.

"A boring sight, isn't it?"

It wasn't just the interior. It included the fact that the servers lined up around us—men with the exact same face as the one who had met us outside the castle—were just standing there without doing anything. All that was lined up on the table were finger bowls and some basic tableware. There weren't even flowers in the vase.

"They said they'd serve at least some soup....."

I heard the girl in the seat next to me mutter, looking around restlessly with a bored expression.

Lina, was she called?

I stole a glance at her. At the same time, I observed the men with the same face. The pitchers and tableware they held looked like they might be made of silver. However,

after seeing the stones and walls that even matter disintegration magic couldn't affect, I had completely lost any intention of believing things as they appeared.

For now, I spoke to her. Thinking about it, she was the only one I could likely make an ally of at the moment.

"More than that, I'm bothered by the empty seats."

It wasn't for any particular reason, but I got an unpleasant feeling from the fact that the seats prepared at that unnecessarily large table weren't just for the two of us—leaving aside the host's seat, there were seats set for eight people in total.

"In a situation like this... usually, an important person comes out before the meal and gives a greeting..... and then that greeting is boring on top of being long."

Lina spoke with a calm air compared to the abnormal situation we were in. I nodded at the mere presence of her words.

"Well, if we're talking about things that bother me, you're one of them..... Was it Lina? Our conversation earlier didn't sync up at all. Where should we start to align things?"

I thought for a moment. What was a topic that definitely wouldn't lead to a misunderstanding—?

The idea came to me, and I opened my mouth.

"If we talk about magic, we should be able to understand each other, right?"

"Magic..... I mean, you didn't look like you were using Chaos Words or anything..."

"Chaos Words?"

I let out another sigh and grimaced.

"This isn't syncing up either, is it?"

It was a helpless feeling, but I said it anyway.

"I couldn't see the composition of your magic, either. It’s been bothering me."

"You can..... see..... the composition of magic.....?"

She also seemed lost in thought, as if she couldn't understand what I was saying.

"Does that mean..... you listen to a spell and analyze how it's constructed? No..... that’s not it, is it? It's the spell chanting itself....."

She furrowed her strong-willed brows.

".....Honestly..... what is going on? This whole situation.....?"

As I listened to her voice, I simply stared at the girl named Lina. There was probably no point in observing her now, but—

Whether she was a cat or a tiger, she was some kind of predator. It wasn't exactly a dangerous aura, but something soft yet sharp.

A question suddenly crossed my mind: was it really okay to think of her as an ally? Just by looking at what she was wearing, I could tell that the style and materials were somehow at odds with anything I knew. She was probably thinking the same thing about me.

Abruptly, she turned toward me.

"Anyway..... there are too few clues to think about. I'm not a fan of listening to someone drone on before a meal, but..... it doesn't look like things are going to start until we do."

True to her words, she shrugged as if giving up on her long train of thought.

But I spoke as the idea occurred to me.

"It's not that things *can't* start. For example, I wonder what would happen if I flipped this table and went on a rampage right here?"

I tapped the tablecloth with my fingertip.

".....I might not even leave a scratch. The houses outside, the roads—they didn't budge even when I used matter disintegration. Your spells didn't work either. What kind of cause do you think is possible?"

Normally, no substance can refuse an order to disintegrate—if one could, it would either be because there was an element obstructing the magical composition itself, or

because the substance was so solidified that it was eternally indestructible. Both were nearly impossible. If it were the former, it would mean being countered by magic, and there's no way I wouldn't have noticed that. If it were the latter, it wouldn't even be possible to process it into building materials in the first place.

If we were talking purely about possibilities—

"It's as if time isn't acting on the matter of the walls and everything else."

I added, as the thought struck me.

"That's the feeling the city itself gives off..... There isn't even the atmosphere of it being something built by someone. It's as if it has existed in this state from the very beginning, and it doesn't know the possibility of breaking or changing."

I didn't quite understand it myself even as I said it, but I waited for her reaction.

"Time has stopped?"

Lina seemed somewhat more realistic.

"There are other possibilities. Our magic might have had its power erased while looking the same. Everything here might be irrationally sturdy. Or actually, it's all a dream. Et cetera, et cetera..... There are certainly several possibilities I can think of, and several ways to escape this situation."

She eventually grimaced as if she wasn't enjoying herself.

"But the problem is, while there are plenty of ways to make the situation worse than it is now, there's no way to make it better."

[.....]

I thought for a while and then countered.

"It worked on the insects."

The thought occurred to me, and I told her.

"They looked the same as the walls, but it worked. The power of our magic was gradually increasing..... that's why they ran. They realized it would be bad if they took any more power than that."

I held up an index finger and continued. What flashed through my mind was the image of the city. The silhouette of the buildings that hadn't budged an inch after the roar and the heat of the explosions had passed.

"The walls were different. No matter what I hit them with or with how much power, there was no sensation that it was working."

"True, the walls were....."

Lina's brow furrowed as she sank into thought.

"That was abnormal. But those weird insects....."

I looked at the men with the same face, who were just standing there without even seeming to listen to the conversation, and whispered.

"Didn't it look like they ran away because *he* showed up?"

"Certainly."

Orphen nodded—

It was then.

"You guests certainly seem to be having a lively time together."

A voice rang out—pompous, yet somehow lacking in true majesty.

It was finally the third time I'd heard a proper voice. I'd run into Keith, met this girl, and now this. Everything else in this city had been nothing but meaningless sounds that couldn't best the silence. Such things don't return a proper answer. Hearing words that were different, I turned around—and there stood an immeasurable mass of meaninglessness.

There wasn't necessarily some trick to why I hadn't felt a presence before he appeared. It wasn't as if he had suddenly manifested from the air. The carpet was thick enough to muffle footsteps, and the door had been left wide open. It wasn't even that the person was consciously trying to be stealthy.

I felt my cheek twitch slightly. He wore a theatrical costume using every gaudy primary color imaginable. Or rather, it *was* a theater costume. If there were a name tag on his chest that said "The King," it might have been the most modest description possible. His chest was red, and his pumpkin-shaped pants were white. Thin legs were

wrapped in orange tights. Oversized socks and shoes.

His wide ears were accented with mysterious balls of fur, but as someone who was struggling to find a part of this man that *wasn't* an accent, there wasn't much I could do. At his waist—was that a rapier? He carried a competitive fencing sword. He proudly curled his mustache, and amidst his lily-white skin, only his lips shone with a strangely glossy pink light. His eyelashes were prominent over his drooping eyes.

"No, no, now, now. You needn't stand."

He raised both hands with a generous air.

"I understand the courtesy due to a guest."

[.....]

For the time being, all I could do was freeze. Thousands of ways to handle this situation flashed through my head, but not a single one of them seemed like it wouldn't offend this man.

".....Uh... well....."

For now, I heard Lina beside me trying to play along and give a reply.

"We appreciate your thoughtfulness....."

"Hahaha. Lina Inverse. Not a bad greeting."

The man, who had shed one or two of his primary colors, walked briskly to the host's seat, casting a meaningless sidelong glance at his guest—that is, at me.

I looked around and saw that two of the men who had been standing still as always approached him without a sound and took his cloak. A fluffy, sky-blue and red cloak. The only one who seemed to have noticed the removal of the cloak was the man in primary colors himself.

Lina continued her questioning. Or so she tried. Her words—for now—seemed to attempt a calm pretense, but I didn't miss the vein that momentarily popped on her forehead or the way her hand almost reached for the empty dishes.

"You knew my name..... though it sounds like you just found out?"

But the primary-colored man merely tilted his nose upward as if he wasn't very

interested.

"Hmm? No, I didn't know. I knew after I called you. Do you understand?"

He was saying things that made no sense.

".....No..... what exactly does that mean.....?"

"And you."

He turned toward me, ignoring her reaction.

"A solitary name? Well, fine. Orphen, is it? You seem to be a closed-off and fanatical group organism. A hybrid crossbred with other races."

He spoke in a resonant voice, far more than his frame would suggest.

"I am Voim. Welcome to my table, guests. No, don't stand, don't stand."

[.....]

"Are you planning to make the food *now*? Forget it, I'm not in the mood to eat."

I hadn't intended to lift my hips from the chair in the first place, but I let it slide for now.

"The messenger said they'd serve at least some soup."

Lina's tone had also become blunt. However, Voim didn't seem to care in the slightest and gave a greasy smile.

But Lina couldn't help but let out a bit of sarcasm.

"At a table with no food."

"No, to be precise, it wasn't my messenger who said that, but rather he reflected what you all were thinking. Hmm. Therefore, I cannot answer what you do not know."

He said more things that I both understood and didn't.

"Voim, huh... I'll remember that. Since you probably won't be able to call yourself that by tomorrow."

Orphen also twisted his mouth into a grimace.

".....I don't think you'll object....."

Lina whispered secretly so only I could hear.

"Is it okay if I knock this guy flat after he's done talking?"

"Punch him before I do. If it's after me, he probably won't have any joints left."

I replied with a straight face.

"Now, now."

Voim raised a hand casually. He motioned to his subordinates, who all had the same face—honestly, it didn't matter which one.

"In short, because you all thought of that 'soup' as an appetizer—"

After continuing some sort of explanation for a while, he tried to snap his fingers. His thin fingers, with neatly trimmed nails, just slipped past each other with a *swish*.

But Voim didn't mind.

"So, that soup, hmm. Is it something like this?"

At that same moment—it seemed like nothing but perfect timing—a subordinate entered pushing a cart covered with a cloche. He brought it skillfully to the table, and when the lid was removed, the scent of soup drifted through the room along with the steam. I watched the server's hands intently and remained wary of the soup bowl set before me, but I couldn't discover anything particularly suspicious.

Judging by the scent, the soup contained some kind of meat. In fact, it was appetizing. But I wasn't in the mood to simply follow my instincts.

".....Soup..... huh....."

I heard Lina mutter deeply.

"Eat up."

Voim suggested cheerfully, yet with plenty of pomposity.

"I don't have the habit of intake by softening chopped-up corpses with boiling water,

but..."

[.....]

I put down the spoon I had almost touched.

"*Corpses*."

Looking next to me, Lina was carefully starting her meal, though she looked disgusted by Voim's words. She smelled the aroma before taking it into her mouth and took plenty of time after letting the spoon touch her lips, as if she were checking for poison rather than tasting it.

Watching her—I sighed.

"Then, I wonder what kind of elegant meals you're having? Voim, was it?"

I was so irritated I couldn't even think of proper polite language. If he got angry and showed his hand, that would be fine by me.

"I am the Creator and the Absolute... I exist from the Beginning, and I exist until the End."

In any case, Voim just put on a pretentious voice.

"Hmph. That's amazing."

Lina's voice sounded like she didn't believe a word of it. I gave a snort of laughter, too.

"You're trying a bit too hard for someone just pretending to be a king, aren't you?"

"Hmm."

Voim blinked once, looking blank. I felt like I saw a hallucination of his long eyelashes getting tangled, and I looked away. My eyes met Lina's, who happened to be looking at me sideways.

"He's one thing, but this soup is actually pretty good. Doesn't seem like there are any weird drugs in it."

[.....]

Listening to my own stomach growl, I also picked up the spoon. I took a sip, and it actually wasn't bad. Although I could hardly call it as high-class as the dining hall's interior.

(*Somehow..... yeah. It's a familiar taste..... maybe?*)

The taste I was most used to—yes, the kind of taste found in a student cafeteria.

My tongue and nostrils were tasting a cheap, one-souquet-a-plate soup like the one I'd eaten across from my sister years ago, yet when I opened my eyes, I was holding an elegant silver spoon. Feeling a strange sense of illusion, I took a second sip.

How long was the silence in the conversation? I couldn't tell by my senses, but it probably wasn't that long. I focused on the soup for a while, but as if suddenly remembering, Lina spoke to Voim.

"Oh. You can continue."

"......Yeah."

Voim was unexpectedly compliant. But he immediately waved his hand pompously again.

"There is something I wish to convey to you all."

"I REFUSE!"

The answer from both of us was immediate and swift.

Light was born in the pure darkness.

White light fluttered down from a square window pierced in the heavens. It wasn't my imagination that the light appeared to waver. Dense fog was invading the darkness along with the light.

And then—

"Ha!"

With a small voice and a faint splash, a man fluttered down from the light to the bottom of the darkness.

"Hmm."

"He's getting all satisfied by himself. Hmm?"

Lina raised a voice of doubt beside me.

"Crossbreed."

"The ESP...?"

"No, I don't get it either."

I shook my head and waited for the primary-colored man. He probably intended to do something else, but he waved a finger casually.

"I shall have a meal prepared..... what do you desire?"

I groaned and clicked my tongue.

"No need for surprises!"

He shouted in an especially loud voice with an exaggerated gesture, as if responding to a welcoming fan. His meager frame...

Following that—

"Hah!"

"Gwaaaaaaah!"

Three women. One remained in a fixed pose, while the other two were in unnecessarily dangerous positions.

Splash, crash, thud, splash, crack!

The three of them became a single lump and made a magnificent splashing sound.

One of those who fell in a clump—Amelia—immediately stood up.

"Gourry-san, Bonnie-san, be quiet! This is the very stronghold where evil dwells! Unprepared noises will call the enemy!"

This, coming from someone who had forcibly dragged the other two down and failed

her own landing. The man beside her—Gourry—looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he remained silent.

Gourry and Bonnie—the two who had been addressed—splashed around in the water for a while.

"I mean, why do we have to enter from a place like this!?"

Bonnie, finally managing to pick herself up, let out a scream-like voice.

"It's pitch black."

Bonnie's tone was much calmer than her sister's—or rather, it was quite carefree. Indeed. The light from above only faintly revealed the reflecting water surface and the silhouettes of the four of them. The rule of darkness was still strong and deep.

In that darkness, a voice flowed.

Like a song—Amelia's spell.

"Lighting!"

Responding to the "Words of Power" that were unleashed, light was born in the void.

It was about the size of an adult's fist. It illuminated the area with a far greater amount of light than a torch.

The space stretched out like a tunnel. The materials of the walls and floor were probably the same as those of the buildings above ground. There were elevated walkways on both ends, and the water surface flowing shallowly over the floor was lit by the magical light, creating countless sparkles.

".....Honestly, I feel like I'm really not compatible with sorcerers....."

"What kind of place is this?"

As Gourry and Bonnie each muttered, Gourry scratched his head.

".....Looks like..... a sewer..... or something....."

"A SEWER!?"

Gourry let out a scream despite himself.

"The kind of sewer with coliform bacteria and domestic wastewater and complaints about bad smells and red tides and plague carriers squeaking!?"

"You mustn't worry about that!"

Amelia said to her, looking strangely proud.

"The direction changed again..."

Coggie muttered, but with neither the energy nor the grounds to resist, she trudged along. Following behind her without a single thought were Bonnie and Gourry. Their four sets of footprints remained on the stone walkway at the edge of the tunnel. The lighting spell followed Bonnie, clinging to her as if playing.

Following Amelia's lead, we advanced right, then left—

"By 'permit'... what exactly do you mean?"

Gourry asked in a stunned voice, scratching his ear with the pen he had just taken.

"Address unknown? There's no way a permit would be issued to someone like that. If you're unauthorized, it’s going to be a huge mess, you know?"

Coggie pulled back with a start and peered intensely at him, speaking in the tone of a police officer conducting a roadside interrogation.

"Current address and registration number. I'll be checking them later."

She pointed at the sword at Gourry's waist and pulled out a rabbit-themed notepad.

"Me?"

Gourry pointed at himself.

"I'm Gourry. Gourry Gabriev. As you can see, I'm just a wandering mercenary. I don't have a fixed address. And as for 'registration number'—I haven't even bothered to think about that incomprehensible word."

Coggie, who was struggling with a notepad that had become soggy and limp from the moisture, froze for a moment.

"Hah?"

"By the way, what's your name?"

Coggie had finally gotten around to asking him that after we had been walking for a while. It wasn't exactly a tone meant for small talk.

"I'm sure you know. It's the license for the possession of bladed weapons. Don't tell me you didn't know they're a prohibited item under city ordinances. You should consider yourself lucky you weren't caught outside the city. The guys in the Armed Bandit Combat Division aren't exactly gentlemen, to put it mildly."

".....Uhh....."

Gourry looked troubled and listened quietly to Coggie’s lecture for a while.

"So basically..... is it bad?"

He asked back, not understanding in the least what was so bad about it.

"Honestly. 'Bad' doesn't even begin to cover it. If it's deemed malicious, you could face a prison sentence without probation."

As she spoke, Coggie tapped the sword repeatedly with the tip of her pen.

"A prison sentence!?"

He understood at least that it seemed quite bad, and he began to panic slightly.

"But hey, everyone carries a sword, don't they? ...No way! Was everyone keeping it a secret from me that they had these permit things!?"

He looked around hurriedly to see if there was anyone else he could ask, but unfortunately, he was the only one carrying a sword here. Coggie let out a sigh.

"Naturally, brokers go through the proper legal procedures to get authorization. It's because there are underground people like you that such troublesome measures are necessary. Do you understand?"

There was a theory that her logic was slightly skewed, but neither she nor Gourry noticed.

"Anyway, where did you get that sword? The broker who failed to file a sales report is going to have a problem, too."

"No, this is... I brought it from home, but....."

With a look of genuine distress directed at Coggie, he stammered.

"Wh..... what should I do? I didn't know this country was like that. Am I really going to be arrested like this?"

"Well, in this case, I think I can allow you to turn yourself in," Coggie said in the tone of an understanding detective. "For now, if you surrender that sword to the authorities and complete the proper paperwork, there won't be a problem. Just be careful from now on."

"Surrender it!? ....."

Gourry muttered with a look of utter despair, thought for a moment, and then—

"I've got it!"

He clapped his hands together and spoke with renewed energy.

"Listen, the reason the sword is no good is because the blade is dangerous, right?"

".....What. Was it a replica all along?"

Coggie groaned in exasperation.

"If so, you should have said so from the—"

"No, it's not that."

Gourry pulled a needle from his tunic and tapped the hilt of the sword—*clink, clink*. He removed the peg—the fastener that secures the hilt to the blade—and, holding the hilt in one hand, he offered the blade (still in its scabbard) to Coggie with the other.

"Here. You have it."

He spoke with a bit of a proud look.

"This way there's no problem, right?"

"Well, I suppose it's not a problem..... maybe."

Stuffing her notepad and pen back into her pocket, Coggie accepted the scabbard.

She looked at the hilt left in Gourry's hand.

"But what are you going to do with that? There's no point in keeping just the hilt....."

".....Well, it's fine. Anyway, the problem is solved now."

He spoke vaguely and gave her a wink.

"......Hmm."

Coggie groaned as she held the scabbard. Whether it was because of the weight of the scabbard or because she wasn't entirely convinced by Gourry's answer, it was hard to say. However, she soon began to worry about something else.

"By the way, we're moving along pretty fast, but are you sure we're going the right way?"

She shifted her target and called out to Amelia, who was leading the way.

"It's fine!"

Amelia replied with total confidence, pointing in a random direction.

"The scenery doesn't change, so it feels like we're going in circles or that we've found our own footprints from earlier, but it's just your imagination! Please believe in my intuition!"

"I mean, is it just a 'hunch'?"

"Besides, the scenery not changing is one thing, but if we find our own footprints, that’s a certainty. We're going in circles."

Coggie asked with half-closed, skeptical eyes, but Amelia's confidence didn't waver in the least.

"Then believe in my Soul of Justice!"

"No, either way, it's just a hunch....."

I let out a tired sigh.

"No! That is surely a trap!" Amelia declared without a hint of doubt. "The road to evil is usually long and arduous! Which means this must be a despicable trick by evil to

lead us astray! Here, believing in one's comrades is what is truly necessary!"

"It's all right, Sister Coggie. It seems we are heading in the right direction for now."

"I feel like it's becoming unnecessarily long and arduous, though....."

Amelia nodded satisfyingly at those words, but Coggie was naturally not convinced.

"How can you even tell?"

Coggie turned around to ask, and Bonnie replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Because it seems this little one's home is in this direction."

—*This little one?*

Amelia also turned around at the strange phrase. Bonnie was patting the back of the creature she was sitting on—a bug-like thing about the size of a large dog. Incidentally, five or six of them were huddled together in a group.

And then.

"Eek!?"

Coggie and Amelia screamed and bolted away at full speed.

[?]

Beside Bonnie, who looked blankly as if she didn't understand why the two were surprised, Gourry stood just as blankly.

"Wha—wha—wha—"

".....Wha..... wha..... wha..... WHA!?"

While running away, Coggie and Amelia tripped and scrambled backward, letting out wordless groans.

"Wh-what on earth is that all of a sudden!?"

Coggie was the one who finally managed to find her voice, pointing a trembling finger at the insects.

"Umm."

Bonnie blinked, patting the back of the nearest insect.

"They're quite comfortable to ride."

"I didn't ask you that!"

"They've been here for a little while now. These guys," Gourry said in an utterly casual tone, perhaps trying to back her up.

"If you noticed them, you should have done something about it!"

".....'Done something'..... well, you see....."

Gourry scratched his head and looked at Bonnie for agreement.

"They don't really seem to be doing anything..... right?"

The two of them were so nonchalant that Coggie's fear began to fade slightly. She observed the insects from a bit of a distance.

"Ugh, they really are bugs. Huge ones. I knew it—abandoned pets in the city sewers that turned white, grew giant, and went rabid."

".....B-but they don't look very 'justice-like' at all! Not those!" Amelia said, pulling back slightly.

"Exactly! If anything, they have a sort of 'Demon King' flavor to them!" Coggie agreed instantly.

It appeared the two of them were not fond of insect-type things.

"You think so?"

Setting aside the theory that it wasn't just a matter of being "fond" of them, Gourry looked at the insects intently once more.

"Even if they look ugly, and their joints creak every time they move, and they look like they'd definitely hate boiling water—I mean, even a worm has a soul, right?"

"That's the part that doesn't seem justice-like at all!" Amelia retorted without a moment's delay.

"You shouldn't discriminate."

Bonnie pouted in protest at that remark.

".....B-Bonnie? Could it be that you actually... hate bugs...?"

Amelia asked with a moment of calm, to which Bonnie replied with an offended expression.

"That's not true at all! Why on earth would you think that? That's very rude to these little guys!"

She spoke while casually patting the back of an insect.

"Where did they even come from?"

"It seems they use this area as their living space."

Bonnie gestured vaguely around while answering Coggie's question.

"Now, now. No need to be so repulsed."

Gourry spoke lightheartedly to the two who had their mouths twisted in disgust.

"See? They say a journey is all about... something."

"If you abbreviate it that much, I have no idea what you're trying to say."

—*Everyone, do you know this story?*

It was Bonnie who let out her voice in a quiet, almost solemn tone.

"The Attack of the Killer Beetle..... no, wait, it's the story of the Kind-Hearted Insect. Let's see. What was it called? Well, anyway, you know it, right? Could you tell me about it?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about anymore."

Coggie could do nothing but groan. However—

"Could it be that story?"

Amelia's reaction was different. It seemed she had something in mind.

"The story of the Kind Insect—'Goodbye, Yellow-Spotted Swallowtail'?" She brought up a mysterious book title.

"No, I'm sure the title was 'Go For It, Smooth Hand Crab'!"

Coggie groaned. Since he seemed to be trying to soothe them, he probably meant to say something like "Good company makes the journey shorter."

"Anyway. They're just bugs. Even if they are big," Gourry insisted. Even as he said it, he seemed secretly concerned about their size.

"I wonder if a crab is an insect," Bonnie mused.

Regardless, the conversation remained entirely unconvincing.

Just as a dissatisfied Amelia was about to say something from the side—

Coggie’s retort or monologue was ignored by everyone.

"I don't know about those books, but....."

Amelia glanced at the insects.

"Well..... if I think of these insects as swallowtail larvae, the fear does fade a bit....."

"Is that how it works?"

"Well, I don't really get it myself..."

Gourry shook his head when Coggie asked for his opinion.

Having lost some of her fear, Amelia tentatively approached the insects.

"But really, what on earth are they? These little bug-friends?"

And then.

As if that were the signal, one small insect—about the size of a fist—hopped out from the group and perched neatly on Bonnie's shoulder. It began making various gestures with its limbs, and Bonnie nodded repeatedly.

"It seems..... they wandered in and ended up settling down here."

"You can understand them!?"

Coggie screamed at Bonnie's "translation." Amelia and Gourry also widened their eyes.

Ignoring them, Bonnie went through a series of gestures, and the small insect gestured back. As if weighing the contents, she closed her eyes for a moment.

"It seems they have a grievance to air."

"A grievance!?"

Amelia was the one who reacted to those words.

"Yes."

Nodding firmly, Bonnie began another exchange in body language.

".....This city..... they were brought here..... from their own country..... by force....."

"Since ancient times, it's been standard to infiltrate an evil stronghold from the sky or the sewers!"

Naturally, even being told that, I had no idea why or how it made everything "all right." Coggie leaned against a nearby wall, looking faint.

"But..... even if you call it a sewer, this water isn't actually that dirty."

"Ah..... Father, Mother... Constance is one step further away from the heaven where you both live....."

Gourry patted the sobbing Coggie on the shoulder, offering words that I couldn't tell were meant to be a death sentence or comfort.

"Anyway, let's just go along with it for now."

".....It is....."

"But even if you find this 'evil,' what exactly are you going to do?"

Following Gourry's words, Bonnie scooped up some water in her hand. Coggie glared

at her.

Ignoring her tearful sister entirely, Bonnie asked her question. Amelia turned the finger she was pointing into the void into a fist.

"What are you saying!? Don't you know the horror of domestic wastewater contaminated with E. coli? Call the city hall! What we need is bleach! About two tons of it!"

"I'll punish them on the spot!"

"Punish....."

"Never mind the bleach!"

Amelia, seemingly not knowing what bleach was, pointed sharply down one end of the sewer.

"Anyway, the evil is further in!"

Whether she was listening or not—or rather, clearly regardless of the situation—Bonnie was patting the magical light of the lighting spell. The concepts of "cooperation" or "unity" no longer existed in this place.

"Uuuugh. Why did it come to this....."

"Now, now... don't be so down....."

In the hands of the muttering Bonnie, the captured lighting spell was struggling and squirming. Of course, such a thing shouldn't normally be able to be grabbed by hand, but Amelia, who was being intensely passionate while looking in the wrong direction, didn't notice.

"Summary executions are not good."

Coggie suddenly stopped crying and interjected. She spoke in the tone of a lecturing teacher rather than a police officer.

"If a crime is being committed, it should be handled by the authorities after the proper procedures."

"What are you saying!?"

Amelia spoke to Coggie with a tone of reproach.

"If an unexplained situation occurs, the first thing you do is punish the evil! Didn't your father teach you that!?"

"No, we didn't have that kind of custom in our house....." Coggie muttered with a troubled face.

"Well, if your customs are different, it can't be helped. Regardless, punishing evil is never a bad thing!"

Being told so firmly, Coggie agonized for a moment.

".....Well, it's not like there are any police boxes in this city anyway."

Taking that as agreement, Amelia pointed sharply toward the end of the sewer.

"Then it's settled! We depart immediately!"

".....The direction is different from before, though....."

Even as she said it, it seemed like she just didn't care anymore; Coggie's voice lacked any conviction.

"It's fine! Surely! I have a feeling!"

Amelia turned back to the group.

Amelia's lighting spell, which she had created, was performing a triple-and-a-half-twist jump following the movement of Bonnie's fingertips. It seemed Bonnie had tamed it and even taught it tricks while Amelia was busy lecturing the air.

"Wha—!?"

"Yes?"

No. Normally, such a thing was impossible.

Faced with a sight that completely and utterly transcended common sense, Amelia asked—or rather, pulled back slightly in confusion.

"U-um..... by any chance, are you also a sorceress.....?"

Bonnie turned around while stroking the "throat" (whatever that meant) of the light.

"A sorceress? No, I am nothing of the sort. I am a perfectly ordinary citizen."

She said something quite terrible quite casually.

".....Taming strange things again....."

Seeing Coggie sighing beside her, this was likely a common occurrence for Bonnie.

Amelia stared at the frolicking light for a while longer as if wanting to ask more, but finally, she decided not to care and gave a large nod.

"Anyway, if we defeat the evil, everything should be resolved! Let's depart immediately, everyone!"

She pointed sharply and began to walk.

At the word "forced," Amelia's blood of justice began to boil, and her eyebrows gave a tiny twitch.

".....I can't go back..... I want to go back..... Ah... it's..... dark here..... cold....."

Through Bonnie's simultaneous interpretation—delivered in the chanting tone of a spirit medium—she continued:

".....Scared..... running away..... every day..... no sky..... no soil either..... tired....."

"In short!"

Amelia clenched her fists tight, imagining the scenario from those fragments of words.

"Just as I thought! A massive evil exists here and has kidnapped these poor insects from somewhere else!"

It seemed that in the face of justice, physiological disgust didn't count for much, as she was now referring to the bugs with the polite suffix "-san." Bonnie continued interpreting without pause.

"Speaking of limits..... the autumn sports day..... from the day I thought I was

finished, I found my true strength—"

Smack.

Struck by Bonnie while she maintained an expressionless face, the insect returned to the original topic.

"These insects are asking us for help. And also....."

Bonnie glanced at the insect on her shoulder.

"It seems someone else was taken to the castle earlier."

"Which means there are other victims!"

"They said the person looked very similar to you all. An extremely vicious creature that started hurling balls of fire at them the moment it saw them."

The instant Bonnie said that—the insect perched on her shoulder suddenly jumped! It snatched the notepad and pen that Coggie had carelessly stuffed into her pocket—*skritch, skritch!*—it scribbled something onto an open page.

".....This is!!"

"Wha....."

Drawn by Coggie's cry of shock, the other three peered at the note—

"No way.....?"

A groan of agitation escaped their lips. Drawn on the rabbit notepad in a realistic, sketchy style were—

Unmistakably, Orphen and Lina.

"Who, and why, and how!?"

Thud. I slammed my fist onto the table, making the plates hover a few millimeters as I shouted. My chair went flying backward.

"Explain the causality, the origin, the reason, and the motive! No excuses, you hear me? Why the hell did you drag us to this place we don't even know and tell us we have

to live here forever!?"

"Now, now."

"No 'now, now'!"

Voim placed a finger to his forehead and slowly shook his head.

"Wait, wait. To begin with, that wasn't quite accurate."

"Precisely, I mean for you to live as wild samples of inhabitants in my world for a while."

"Samples?"

"You've got to be joking!"

Lina also stood up, her eyebrows slanted upward in anger.

"If you want us to live here, at least do some proper pest control!"

Voim blinked back at her blankly. Lina continued, waving her spoon about.

"There were tons of them in the city, right? Those weird insects! Or... do you not even know about that? Mr. Self-Proclaimed Creator?"

"Oh, those rejects?"

He clapped his hands together.

"I brought those fellows in from another world, but they weren't suitable as residents. I'd like to send them back as soon as possible, but they just keep running away and won't listen. And if I leave them alone, they just keep multiplying."

".....Another world.....?"

Lina furrowed her brows at Voim’s casual remark.

"Another world. A world that is not this world..... isn't that so?"

"Don't give me that nonsense—"

I waved my hand with a groan.

".....No..... I mean, 'another world' is exactly what that means, but....."

Lina looked at me with a troubled gaze, and I had no real answer to give her. I just stared back at her in silence.

"Hmm."

Voim took a sip of his soup as if to distract himself, then struck a thinking pose with his hand on his chin and spoke nonchalantly.

"So, what's the truth?"

"This is a world I am creating according to my ideals."

".....So, uh....."

Lina pressed her finger to her temple and began to speak in a tone that suggested she had, for the moment, given up on a great many things.

"If I were to just accept what you're saying like an idiot without thinking about it at all..... you created this world and called those insects here."

"Well, even if you put it that way, if I'm asked for the truth after I've already told it, there's not much I can do."

I paused for a beat before continuing.

"Are you stupid!?"

I shouted.

".....And so..... they didn't really fit the world, so you left them be and... brought us here instead?"

"Another world? That's not just nonsense, it's a full-blown delusion. Even fairy tales don't have that kind of stuff. Listen, wherever this is, it's definitely somewhere on the Kiesalhima continent—"

As if to fill the gap in my words, Voim nodded. Whether she was losing confidence as she spoke, Lina's voice slowly trailed off.

I looked at Lina. I didn't necessarily have doubts.

"Right. Creating a world is all well and good, but if there's no one to live in it, it's meaningless. On the other hand, if I were to create inhabitants based on myself..."

He looked at his subordinates and let out a deep sigh. Creating inhabitants based on himself... it was a ridiculous thought, too ridiculous to even consider.

"In that case, I'll just call in some sample creatures from a nearby world and create residents based on them. Simple, isn't it?"

Silence passed over the room for a moment. Lina only endured that silence with a difficult expression for a few seconds.

".....Well, setting aside that tasteless joke."

"Kiesahirma?"

Lina asked back, having misheard it again. She looked at me with a frown. For a second, I felt a chill—but I continued, as if to test her reaction.

"No one has ever left that continent..... We've..... inherited the continent after the Dragon race vanished."

As I watched her face twist while she listened, I began to feel a sense of despair. My voice turned raspy, as if giving in to the feeling. I stopped right there.

I cleared my throat. Lina's composure had finally clouded over. She must have felt the same thing I did.

".....Uh..... there was only one castle, right? If your memory is correct....."

"The Kiesalhima Continent. Have you really never heard of it?"

Was she insane? The thought crossed my mind. The doubt that hadn't been there a few seconds ago suddenly turned into a conviction.

She shook her head vigorously from side to side. She didn't know. She didn't know his world.

"In that case, you've never heard of Zephilia or Seiruun...? Could it be...?"

[.....]

I shook my head in vain and sank back into my chair. My shoulders slumped in defeat. She looked at Voim with an expression of disbelief.

".....This is...?"

Voim himself was calm. So calm it made making a fuss feel foolish.

"I don't quite get it, but it seems you've understood. Yes. I am the Creator of this world. A God, so to speak."

"A God?"

I groaned in a fit of abandonment. I leaned my weight back until the chair tilted, letting two of its four legs dangle in the air.

Voim corrected me in a very serious tone.

".....No, perhaps it's different from the concept of a God in your minds. If I had to say... a Demi-god."

"A Demi-god?"

"Doesn't quite ring a bell, I guess....."

"It can't be helped. I have no other way to explain it."

I shook my head at Voim, who spoke with a crinkle in his chin.

"Anyway~ calling yourself a 'God' is a bit too vulgar. If you're going to go that route, you should be more vague and grand, like 'The universe is God, the universe is nothingness and the fourth dimension and the all and the individual and the circle and the arc.'"

"No, I think that would just be even more confusing."

Ignoring Lina's point, I continued.

"Besides, 'Demi-god' has such a synthetic ring to it. Is there something... you know, a more common name?"

"Common?"

".....Something a normal person would hear and understand instantly..... I suppose?"

"Hmmmm."

Voim sank into a long silence.

"Understandable..... a common way of saying it..... simply, then? Demi-god..... a thing that is not a God is a bit awkward. Hmmm..... let's see..... A thing like a God? A God-ish thing?"

"That's it!"

"Eh?"

"I see. Well, I suppose it was destiny."

I raised my voice, causing Voim to stop mid-sentence. At the same time, Lina shouted over me.

"No!"

I nodded forcefully.

"That's it!"

"What!?"

"'A God-ish Thing'—that sounds like it! It sounds right, it has a very 'right' feeling to it!"

"You're right! No problem there!"

"Whaaaat!?"

"Since 'God-ish Thing' is a bit of a mouthful, how about just 'Ish-Thing'?"

"Whaaaaaaaaaat!?"

"Yes, yes. Named: Ish-Thing. How wonderful, you have a great name now. Ish-Thing."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat—Hey, wait a minute!"

Voim stood up, looking flustered. He caught his breath and struck another

exaggerated pose.

"Now that I hear it, even that name somehow sounds like an Ish-Thing."

"I am Voim. The Creator and Absolute."

"No, it doesn't just 'somehow' sound like it, it's more like it's exactly it."

Voim waved his fists around, his face flushing—though his extremely white skin didn't turn even ten percent redder.

"I command you to call me Voim properly!"

"Voim-ish Thing?"

"Don't combine them!"

After panting for a moment, Voim regained his breath. He spoke slowly, as if savoring the words.

"I am the Creator and the Absolute....."

"Yeah, I've heard that part a dozen times."

He glared at me as I groaned.

"Listen well, I am the absolute existence in this world! Nothing I have created can be harmed by your power! I can create things that are absolutely indestructible just by commanding it! Have you realized my power now!?"

Lina groaned in a voice full of deep emotion, as if impressed by something strange. "He's the type who was teased for his name as a kid, isn't he?" I also found myself asking that question in a weird way.

"I don't really get what the childhood of a God-ish Thing would be like."

"He was probably an Ish-Child."

Suddenly, the sight of Voim glaring at us with bloodshot eyes and a twitching face entered my field of vision, and I whispered. I kept my voice low so only Lina could hear.

".....Maybe it's a bad idea to offend him? Even if what he's saying is complete

nonsense, it's a fact that we couldn't leave a single scratch on the walls earlier."

Lina nodded and spoke in a low voice.

"Mmm..... true..... if we believe his words, then logically, he's also the only one who can send us back....."

".....So, we've finally found the thing that might turn this situation around....."

After muttering that, I paused for a moment. I forced a smile and turned back to Voim. I spoke cheerfully.

"I have understood."

"Oh?"

Voim’s expression softened as if he had regained his good mood. Then—

"In other words, you are the great creator of this world and our summoner."

Lina said with a smile that looked like it was pasted on.

"Ho-ho-ho-hoh."

Voim puffed out his thin chest quite simply.

"Yes."

Voim nodded, smiling.

"Mmm. Even highly developed native creatures can be made to recognize some level of understanding if explained with such patience. It seems nothing is impossible."

He nodded with satisfaction. However, behind his forcefully puffed-out chest, I could only see his chin with its thin beard bobbing up and down.

"Ahahaha. Is that so?"

I tried to bend the spoon under the table while keeping my expression unchanged. It didn't budge.

I heard Lina, with a vein popping on her forehead but her smile still intact, confirming with Voim.

"Uh, well. So, the only reason you called us here was to use us as samples for the residents, right?"

"Mmm. I see. You can remember things as long as they're around a hundred characters, can't you, Lina-Inverse-ish native creature?"

The fact that she was able to maintain her smile was purely a product of her patience—though to any observer, it was a hollow achievement. I opened my mouth while keeping my own smile at its limit.

"So, Ish—"

"VOIM!"

In an instant, Voim, who had been in a good mood until then, turned into a terrifying sight.

"Ah, no, Lord Voim, so..... how long do we have to stay here?"

"In units you can understand..... it will be about a week. After that, I will erase all your memories and return you to your original lives. I intend to arrange it so that you return seconds after you were summoned. There should be no inconvenience."

"Nfufufufu. In that case, it seems somehow okay-ish."

No matter how I interpreted it, I didn't think this would end for free. That was the "aura"—there was no other way to describe it—that I was radiating.

"So, what about meals in the meantime... and..... the reward? With your great power, Lord Voim, I'm sure lumps of gold and jewels would pop out just by thinking about it, right? Naturally."

"Hahaha. As you wish. I am the great Absolute. I have plenty of rewards that even creatures with minuscule memory capacities and impoverished ideas could at least imagine to their limits."

"Hahahahahaha."

I laughed along with the Ish-Thing. I didn't feel like I was laughing, though. Not at all.

"Well, those are words to be grateful for. So, a week, then."

I listened to Lina's voice, which was twitching all over.

"Well..... setting that aside."

For now, I tried to change the subject.

"You're using us as samples..... what kind of world are you planning to create?"

By then, Voim was leaning back in his chair so far it looked like his spine might snap.

"Mmm. Of course, the samples I called are not just you two 'animals'."

His eyes shone with a greasy light, and he began to explain so rapidly there was no room to interject.

"I have called ten people, chosen purely at random from numerous other worlds..... well, it's unlikely you'd know each other's faces. Since I chose them so randomly, when everyone is gathered, they will surely become the inhabitants of a very standard world."

"I see. So I was chosen as a very 'general' human."

".....Well, certainly... in terms of being a sample with a standard personality, I suppose I'm appropriate....."

I played along for now and looked up into the void.

"So, I should be grateful to those guys..... I guess?"

"I intend to create my world based on those two."

In the end, he was just a geek talking about his hobby—he began to talk about his work with unnecessary passion.

And in the end, we were just the others forced to listen to it. I looked and saw that Lina, no longer interested in listening, was simply shoveling soup into her mouth while keeping her eyes on him.

"Actually, I've found samples among them that are exactly suited to my ideals..... yes. What one might call 'True Ideal Residents.' The fact that the sampling of all residents can be finished in a week is largely thanks to the existence of those two."

"And so, allow me to introduce: the Lady Naga of the White Serpent (Provisional), and

Lord Keith Royal (Provisional)!"

The moment I heard those names, the only thing I could manage was to fall over, chair and all. Beside me, for reasons unknown, Lina also dropped her spoon with a clatter.

The curtains slid open with a heavy sound... and there, sitting deep in an executive chair in the back, was unmistakably Keith. He was dressed in his usual tuxedo, but perhaps as a way of expressing his desire for anonymity, he wore a strange, feathered mask. Furthermore, sitting beside him in a similar fashion was a woman even more bizarre—more sudden—more nonsensical. She wore a similar feathered mask. If the introduction was to be believed, this woman was Naga of the White Serpent.

"I had actually prepared the two of them here in advance. Both seemed utterly captivated by my ideals."

Voim had pointed to a massive velvet curtain behind him. I hadn't paid it much attention, assuming it was just a wall hanging, but apparently, there wasn't a wall behind those curtains; they had been used to partition the room.

If he had kept those two waiting in the back all this time, I couldn't help but think they must be incredibly easygoing. In any case, I had already lost any shred of interest in listening.

"I see."

"Ho-ho."

I couldn't even tell if the tone of Lina's voice reaching my ears meant she was agreeing or if she was just huffing over the hot food. Voim didn't care; he seemed to be reaching a fever pitch. With his usual theatrical gestures, he waved his arms about as if dancing.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Then, let me introduce them—the two who shall be the embodiment of my world's ideals! Well, one might call it a natural sort of humility in the face of such an honor, but both requested anonymity. I wanted to change their voices to suit their wishes, but there were some technical issues..."

He continued muttering to himself. Meanwhile, two of his identical subordinates scurried over and prepared to pull the curtains open to the left and right.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The two of them sat deep in their chairs, doing nothing but laughing loudly.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"What do you think!? Even I, a God, cannot help but find them divine! Look at this noble presence, this sparkle of a refined soul!"

"Ha-hahahahahaha!"

"I am certain that the universe existed precisely for this encounter! Even if I were to entrust my entire existence and future to them, it would not be servitude! For this is the one and only ultimate truth that every scientist and philosopher has sought without end!"

"Ha-hahahahahahaha!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"The conviction backed by intelligence towers strong as steel, and its sharpness shall pierce through every age, remaining eternal and unchanging! Truly, they are worthy of the eternal paradise I create! Now, do not sleep on the floor; celebrate this truth immediately, whether by being moved to tears or by shattering into pieces!"

To be honest, I wasn't listening to those voices. While I buried my face in the carpet, it was those words that remained in my ears. The reason they remained, even though I couldn't understand them. In the end, it was for one reason only. Because it was cruel.

I wasn't looking at anything. What I saw clearly—if I were to name this absurd reality truthfully—yes. It was something I could only call the world of my own heart.

What spread out was a single image. Limitlessly. Faces continuing infinitely within a fog that stacked eternally. Face. Face. Face.

One of the faces belonged to a perverted butler. Another face belonged to a woman wearing nothing but some incomprehensible string-like clothing. Or perhaps I should say, one of each *type* of face.

There were countless faces. Each face faced another, exchanging everyday greetings.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Oh, good morning. It’s quite reddish and salty today, isn't it?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"The site foreman says: 'Dadaigamaberagobomagobocchi.' I don't quite understand the meaning, though."

Laughter that echoed. A city of black stone. No matter how much I waited, the sun would never rise.

"...I don't care."

I heard a voice.

(Doesn't it not matter?)

Exactly, it shouldn't have mattered. It was several seconds later that I realized that was my own voice.

(No matter what happens to this world, why is there any need for me to care?)

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"In any case, what I'm looking forward to is four years from now."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"By the way, did you know this? Now that you've found out, I can't let you live. Oh, the sound of a launch. Let's run, forever and ever."

Indeed, truly. It was something four years away, after all. A world where the three years after and the four years after were both the same.

Infinite faces. Face. Face. A line of faces that would become the formal standard for this world.

(There’s nothing I can do... nothing at all. Just lying here with my face against the rug, looking at this worthless landscape. Ah, I'm tired. Suddenly, just so tired.)

Among the countless faces of only two types, a different face floated up. I couldn't remember it well, but...

(Why have I been putting up with this until now?)

I felt like I could hear her voice.

A girl who looked like she would never show her tears to anyone. A girl with pink hair. She was dressed quite heavily, but she had a strange resolve in her eyes that made even that equipment feel natural.

But that resolve, too, seemed to waver within the ongoing loud laughter.

I don't know the reason, but perhaps my heart had connected with hers. I could only believe that.

(Ah... I understand. We're probably seeing the same thing right now. I could have easily predicted that no good ending was waiting for us... but still.)

(No, I can't actually see it, though.)

Ah, I can see the moment... the flood...

After sinking so deep into the flood of images that I felt like I was drowning, Orphen suddenly woke up.

It seemed I had truly slept for a few seconds. Or perhaps I should say I had fainted.

When I sat up, I saw Lina, frozen in her chair. The hand that had dropped the spoon was now reaching for a knife.

I felt like I understood everything then. Surely, she was a comrade. Within this hopelessly irredeemable situation, she was likely the one and only person I could synchronize with to the highest degree. Somehow, I was certain of that.

And so—

There was only one answer to be derived. I smiled at Lina. She seemed to be smiling too. Because we already understood that there was no other choice.

There was no hesitation.

"I unleash the white blade of light!"

"Burst Flare!"

As if manifesting our rage into a counterattack, the white radiance and crimson flames merged and went wild. We leaped out side-by-side from the exit of the dining hall where the flames swirled.

"We should have just left it alone!?"

"We should have just left it alone, right!?"

"I know that!"

"I know!"

While shouting the same things back and forth, and with Voim's subordinates chasing behind us, Lina and I simply ran with all our might.

Chapter 3: Tricksters

How far did the waterway, vanishing as it was sucked into the darkness, continue?

"It's almost here, everyone."

Bonnie said this after we had continued walking for quite a while, turning left and right. She was leading the way in a style that was either elegant or bizarre, riding a large insect with a smaller one on her shoulder and the lighting spell following her.

The group was not heading toward the enemy. A mysterious enemy. The existence of Orphen and Lina. And the current state of the insects. There were many things that needed to be grasped. Therefore, to hear the details, we decided to head to the insects' hideout for the time being.

"In a place like this... huh..."

Gourry muttered, looking around. It would have been cruel to expect a change in scenery from a sewer, but the surroundings felt no different from when we started.

"Are we... actually going to fit in there? That place?"

"They say it's fine."

To Amelia, who asked out of concern for the size difference with the insects, Bonnie answered simply. Then she pressed her fingers to the corners of her eyes.

"They are living a harsh and painful life. No soil, no sun... they say they want to return to their own land as soon as possible."

"...How terrible..."

Amelia muttered, her brow furrowed.

"What do they do for food?"

In response to Coggie’s question, Bonnie again provided a simultaneous translation.

"They say they look for it in the city above. But many of their comrades are caught

there by bad people and never return..."

"......I see..... it’s really tough for them....."

Gourry patted his chest.

"Just wait. We'll do something about it for you."

"They believe that such a thing cannot continue forever... and after waiting and waiting, they seem to think of us, who have finally appeared, as their saviors."

"It's all right now! Everyone!"

Where did her initial attitude go? Amelia was now completely intoxicated by the situation, her eyes glistening.

"Helping them seems like it might lead to helping myself. In the end, it seems we're in exactly the same situation."

Coggie, on the other hand, remained calm.

"If Orphen is here, well, things will probably work out."

...It felt a bit like relying on others, though.

"If it is Lord Orphen, he will surely resolve everything peacefully!"

Bonnie agreed in a heated tone.

However, beside her, Gourry and Amelia exchanged deeply uneasy looks.

"...If Lina is here too..."

".....I just hope things haven't become overly complicated....."

They showed a slightly different reaction.

"Ah!"

It was then that Bonnie raised her voice.

"We've arrived!"

The group couldn't help but stop. At the end of a sharply curved waterway, a massive

underground cavern and an equally massive structure appeared before them.

The material was the same as the city above. They had likely peeled away paving stones and parts of houses from the surface to build and decorate it. Various other materials, procured from who-knows-where, were also used. The overall design was Gothic, with gold filigree applied to every edge, making the entire building stand out.

On the white wood railing of the bridge spanning the waterway, there were exquisite carvings that seemed to recreate some story. Beyond that—on either side of a magnificent main gate—stood statues of pure gold insects, perhaps their goddess or something similar, twisting their bodies provocatively while draped in thin veils.

"Whoa. This is quite impressive."

Gourry was honestly impressed, while Amelia looked somewhat unconvinced.

"This is their temporary residence... the 'Insect Manor,' a hermitage built in secret to hide from the brutal oppressors!"

"They're using gold, real gold..."

".....A secret temporary residence....."

"Insect Manor, huh? I bet the room rates would be high if you stayed here normally."

The three of them muttered their various thoughts in response to Bonnie's explanation.

"For now, it’s apparently a 1700-LDK."

".....Well, I guess that is inconvenient, in a way."

Coggie muttered in a somewhat detached tone. Amelia also wore a complex expression.

".....So the enemy hasn't noticed this place..... that in itself might make them a truly terrifying opponent..."

Receiving body language from an insect, Bonnie again pressed a handkerchief to her eyes.

".....They say it is a meager nest built through the steady work of rearranging

foundation stones from the walls day after day."

She looked at the small insect dancing on her shoulder.

"Ah... 'I miss the leaf mold'..... it says."

"R-right... it’s a bit more luxurious than the royal palace at my home, though..."

[...]

Beside a stunned, muttering Amelia, Coggie scratched her head in silence.

"And so, they say the Chief is waiting inside. They ask if you would mind bearing with it and coming in."

".....Bearing with it....."

As Amelia muttered and began to walk, her footsteps were somehow unsteady.

Stepping inside behind the lead of Bonnie—or rather, the insects—they found the modest life of the creatures. In the main hall, where several large decorative chandeliers hung, was a deep red, long-pile carpet woven with gold and silver thread.

In a rest area at the edge, an insect wrapped in a robe was sinking into a sofa by a bookshelf, puffing on a pipe while engrossed in a book, while another insect painted its likeness on a canvas.

I didn't know by what principle, but white stones embedded at key points in the ceiling and walls emitted a soft glow, serving as lighting. Perhaps to endure daily life and provide spiritual support, gold-lacquered plates inscribed with what seemed to be their slogans were hung on various walls.

They read: "Today’s Labor for Tomorrow," "Faithful to the Basics," "Human Microcosm," "It Can Be Explained by Plasma," "I’m Fine Inside the Court," and so on.

Glancing at such sights, the group passed through the hall into a grand corridor.

".....A 'harsh' life..... right? Truly?"

To Amelia, who asked as if to confirm, Bonnie replied smoothly:

"In a basement like this, there is no wind, no scent of flowers, no chirping of birds... Ah, it seems they are crying, wanting to bury themselves in damp moss in their home

wetlands."

Behind Bonnie as she spoke, two insects wearing headbands were playing table tennis—*ping-pong, ping-pong*.

"I see..... it’s so tough for them....."

Gourry sympathized honestly, but Amelia was just becoming increasingly confused.

"What is that...?"

In response to Coggie, who pointed to a spot slightly further away, Bonnie said casually:

"I believe that is weightlifting to compensate for a lack of exercise."

"...A-anyway... let's go hear what this Chief has to say....."

Amelia urged them forward while trying her best not to look at her surroundings.

"What's wrong, Amelia? You look a bit pale."

".....It’s nothing....."

"They say it’s this way."

Following Bonnie's lead, the group entered a room about the size of a small hall. There was a closet, bookshelves, and a fireplace. On the wall, next to a landscape painting of a lush green forest, was a poster of an insect in a school uniform running with a piece of toast in its mouth.

A mountain of soft-looking cushions sat upon a four-poster canopy bed.

Buried within that pile of cushions was the Chief.

"Forgive the discourtesy of exposing such a miserable state to you," the Chief said.

"What are you saying, Elder!?" Amelia cried out, having turned into a pro-insect partisan, moved by the sight of this "parent and child reunion."

"Such a stouthearted figure enduring hardships and tribulations! It is beautiful; never could it be discourteous!"

The Chief was the same shape as the other insects, but human-sized. Crossword

puzzle magazines were scattered about his feet.

The moment the group had entered the room, the tiny insect on Bonnie’s shoulder had hopped off and latched itself firmly onto the Chief.

".....A reunion of parent and child....." Bonnie explained, dabbing at her eyes. "In a life where one does not know if they will see tomorrow, every fleeting moment spent safely with one's child is a joy. So says the Chief."

"So they aren't larvae then..." Coggie muttered in a completely flat tone, setting her sheathed sword down nearby.

"They were parent and child?" Amelia, on the other hand, seemed to have been struck right in her emotional sweet spot by the phrase "parent and child reunion," and her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Now that you mention it, they do look alike," Gourry offered with a half-hearted nod of agreement.

The Chief and Bonnie gestured with their hands and limbs—

"You have done well to come, O Brave Ones."

The simultaneous translation began.

".....Wait, you... proper nouns too.....?" Coggie started to ask. How on earth did they manage that through body language...?

"Is something bothering you?" Gourry asked.

".....Can you understand? That story."

When asked, Gourry looked a bit sheepish. "Nah. I haven't really known what was going on from the start."

"From the start? Since when, exactly?"

"Well..... since around the time we all met."

"Since *then*!?"

"Pretty much. But it’s fine. I'm sure things will work out somehow. Probably."

For some reason, he looked strangely proud of himself.

"Oh. Also. I definitely understand that it’s bad news if my sword actually has an edge on it here."

"——My head is starting to ache."

The simultaneous translation—which at this point resembled a perfected pair dance more than mere body language—continued. I thought about pointing it out, but neither Bonnie nor the Chief were listening.

".....Summoned from Coronegi of Iyandeth, with no means of return. Having met the conditions for a Warped Drive from a Hyper-Multidimensional Compound Interest Structural Path....."

"Iyandeth's Coronegi——"

Coggie reacted sharply to that translation.

"Though the theory of the Live was only mentioned in the academic circles of year '83, to think it would actually be manifested in reality—"

As Coggie gave up on pointing out the absurdity, Gourry whispered to her.

"Wow."

".....The Hostile Function Theory, which admits that variables change into constants even under unspecified conditions, is the absolute of Galactic Fixation—"

Listening to the meaningless translation as if it were background music, Coggie pressed her hand to her temple in response to Gourry’s words.

"The air is bad underground."

"Yeah."

With a deep sigh, she pulled out the rabbit notepad.

"It's all well and good that we've made it this far, but I wonder what we should do. Orphen—the guy with the sharp eyes in that sketch from earlier—I want to regroup with him."

She opened the notepad and looked at the portrait the insect had drawn. To her,

Gourry spoke easily and with total confidence.

"——Believe in him. Then, you'll definitely meet one day."

"It's not so much believing in him as it is being worried if I leave him alone," Coggie said, smiling at Gourry. "Thanks."

"Yeah." Gourry smiled back. "You'll meet him. That... Ho-phen?"

He clearly hadn't remembered the name.

"It’s Orphen. He’s a thug, so to speak, but I suppose he’s more useful than your average yakuza."

She tilted her head and pointed to the other face drawn next to Orphen.

"More importantly, this girl... is she an acquaintance of yours?"

A faint smile of a nuanced nature crossed his face.

"Yeah. We were traveling together. She's someone you can't just leave alone. In many ways. But—she can be trusted."

Coggie stared intently at the drawing of Lina.

"Well, finding Orphen is easy, so if these two are together, it'll be a breeze to spot them."

"Oh?"

"Because if there’s an explosion or a commotion, he’ll be right in the middle of it. That guy."

"Huh. Is it the same over on your side too?"

"You mean, 'your side' too...?"

Bonnie gasped in surprise through her simultaneous translation. Coggie broke into a cold sweat at the implication of Gourry’s words.

".....Why?"

"And so!"

"No, what do you mean, 'why'....."

It was then that Bonnie’s voice rang out even louder than before.

"What are you saying, Miss Coggie! It's because these people were busy building their hideout and decorating it!"

The group focused on her again as Amelia stepped in to back up the insects.

Whether the translation of the long speech through body language was finally taking its toll, Bonnie was panting heavily.

"Uugh, thank you, Hero Number One."

".....Setting aside all that irrelevant talk from just now, then."

"It was irrelevant!?"

"And when you say 'later'..... you mean you’re actually going to do it later....."

Coggie and Gourry both spoke up.

"Regardless. The name of our great enemy is—Voim. Unless we defeat that man, not only us, but you Heroes as well, will be unable to escape his world....."

Ignoring the interruptions, the translation continued.

"I understand!"

Amelia, the only one listening seriously, gave a victory pose.

"So, we just have to punish the Great Evil!"

"That's all fine, but....."

Coggie questioned the insects with a somewhat tired expression.

"One thing has been bothering me..... if you all have the time to build such a huge house and relax like this, I’d think you could handle things yourselves."

The simultaneous translation—or whatever it was—continued, with Bonnie and the Chief posing as if wiping their eyes.

".....We are, after all, just the helpless masses..... at most, we can only

protect our bodies with an Absolute Hardness Outer Shell, and we can barely withstand thermal rays of five thousand degrees. To stand against that powerful enemy is....."

".....I got burned by 80-degree water just the other day, though....."

Faced with those numbers, Gourry, whose sense of temperature standards was a bit off, thought for a moment.

"So five thousand degrees..... is a bit hotter than boiling water, then....."

".....I guess so....."

Coggie gave up on explaining and just nodded vaguely.

"In that case!" Amelia's eyes burned with fire as she questioned the Chief. "It's safe to assume the enemy will use boiling oil or something similar!"

"Actually, the ones who shot the thermal rays were the two people said to be your comrades, but....."

"Ugh."

Gourry and Amelia both groaned involuntarily.

"We, while somehow managing to escape like this, try our hand at home gardening or stroll along jogging courses; even maintaining our daily lives is difficult..... It is sad, but we have no choice but to rely on the Heroes....."

Bonnie and the Chief shook their heads sorrowfully from side to side.

"The powerful subordinates of Voim torment our kin with even more terrifying tortures..... flipping them over, rolling them around, it is a literal scene from hell—"

Gourry looked at the Chief and muttered to no one in particular.

"Are these guys actually... kind of strong?"

"Well, I certainly don't feel a shred of sincerity from them," Coggie answered, though not to anyone specifically.

"But it's a fact that they are in trouble!"

Amelia, by contrast, spoke with all her might.

"If we are relied upon by those in trouble and we do not respond, justice is as good as dead! Even if the insects don't budge an inch from Lina’s attack spells, or are enjoying their leisure time, or are killing themselves to improve their lifestyle, the fact remains they are in trouble....."

Suddenly cutting her words short, she asked the Chief timidly in a whisper.

".....You *are* really in trouble, right.....?"

"Indeed. I devote this body to the stubborn resistance movement, and my body withers from the hardship....."

"Resistance movement?"

As Coggie repeated the words back, Bonnie and the Chief nodded.

"Giving up tea, for one."

"Just stay quiet."

Hearing that exchange, Amelia nodded firmly.

"At any rate! As long as the fact that you are in trouble remains unchanged, helping you is the path of a human being!"

She caught her breath and added quickly:

".....And if we rely on these people, it feels like we’re never going to be able to go home anyway....."

"Oh, the heart of a Hero! Truly grateful!"

Bonnie translated in an exceptionally loud voice. Her pose and the tone of her voice felt a little bit staged.

"Now that the Hero has reached an understanding, to continue our previous conversation: regarding the securing of straight lines on a warped plane and the influence of pseudo-gravity——"

Just as another futile and incomprehensible chat(?) was about to begin.

.....Rumble.....

A distant—but distinct—vibration occurred.

"What was that?"

"An earthquake? Or.....?"

Amidst the group’s agitation, an insect burst into the room, throwing the door wide.

"What happened!?" Amelia asked, momentarily forgetting they didn't speak the same language.

The insect ignored her and began clicking and chirping something at the Chief.

".....Heroes. A report has come in via mental resonance from our scouts....."

Bonnie translated as the Chief flailed about frantically.

"It seems that just now, two people believed to be your comrades launched an attack against Voim..... However, to challenge that Voim without a plan....."

Bonnie stopped her words abruptly.

"Master Orphen is in danger!?"

She cried out in a voice that was no longer a translation.

The group exchanged looks, nodded, and asked:

"Where?"

"Voim’s castle. In the inner depths—we have to hurry!"

In response, Bonnie snatched up the tiny insect that had been clinging to the Chief.

"We’re borrowing your guide!"

No sooner had she said it than they all dashed out before a reply could be given! Toward the battlefield where Orphen—and Lina—were.

Decorated curtains on the walls, vases as large as an armful, flowers like a spring

arranged within them, candelabras, carpets that absorbed the sound of footsteps..... none of them were the same, yet they were so monotonous that it felt as though we were going in circles.

And when I turned around——

The pursuers, all with the exact same face, were spread across the hallway chasing us. Men who individually looked perfectly ordinary and lacked any distinguishing features were running with their eyes wide open, swinging their arms vigorously.

It was a bizarre sight. Their clothes were the same, and what they carried was the same. For some reason, every single one of them had a business bag in their hand.

Whether there were a dozen—or dozens? It wouldn't have been strange if there were hundreds more further back. The swarm of identical faces, identical forms, and identical movements—like afterimages—numbed my sense of counting.

"Flare Arrow!"

"It’s not working!"

Pointing at the men who continued their chase as if the flames were nothing more than a well-made trick, Lina cried out.

"They're just like the insects... no, just like the stones and walls!?"

It was the same, yet somewhat different. While feeling a sense of desperation, I shook my head. Stones and walls didn't try to harm us, and above all, they didn't chase us. Furthermore—

(These guys are fast?)

I thought I was running at full speed, but the leaders of the men were already trying to overtake us from the side. They likely intended to circle around and block our path.

(I won't let you——)

Beside me, I heard Lina let out a shout. Her small body looked as though it might be dragged down by her heavy-looking cloak, but she swung her arms wide. Lines of fire, appearing as if guided from her fingertips, swirled into several strands and poured down upon the men behind us.

They didn't even dodge. With the same expressionless faces, they took the hits on their noses, their bellies, their legs, and their hands. It made no difference which part was hit; rather than exploding, the fireballs were all simply bounced away and extinguished.

She had probably halfway expected it, but confirming it must have been a shock. She let out a scream-like cry.

The castle’s layout was complex. Until we reached the dining hall, we hadn't gotten lost, partly because we were being guided. After jumping out in the middle of the commotion, we had turned left and right through the lavish corridors, but I felt no sign of an exit anywhere.

As I ran, I gathered and focused my consciousness.

"I unleash the white blade of light!"

A burst of light and heat with all my might caught a man at point-blank range and exploded. The impact caused him to trip and vanish from sight.

I shouted to Lina.

"They just can't be hurt. It doesn't mean we can't do anything!"

She reacted immediately.

"True! In that case..... Diem Wind!"

As she whispered those short words forcefully, a violent current of air opened up the distance between us and the pursuers.

(.....Magic from another world, huh?)

Seeing it again after being told that, I couldn't help but feel a chill down my spine. The term "another world" was something I had only ever heard or said as a joke. I couldn't explain the source of her power, and I probably wouldn't understand it even if it were explained.

Since this girl was the only sample case, I couldn't really say for sure. But judging from the spells I had seen her use outside the castle, the power of her magic could easily kill or wound a human being. I could sense she was accustomed to using it. She was skilled at hurling masses of energy hot enough to singe hair with their blast—it

was probably better not to think about what kind of environment a fifteen-year-old girl like that had grown up in.

But the situation was what it was. I was grateful to be able to rely on her.

"Even if you say we should counterattack.....!" I shouted to her as we ran side-by-side. "Their legs are ridiculously fast... they'll catch up in no time. We have to find a place where we can make a stand."

Lina looked around. Of course, in a vast castle where we didn't know our way, it wasn't as if a convenient place or object would be found just like that. For the time being, she stopped at the end of a corridor that split in two and lifted the carpet beneath her feet. Again, she gave a short whisper I couldn't understand—and thrust her hands under the carpet.

"Diem wind!"

The same gale as before blew up the rug along with the men who were closing in. Without a scream—and if we were lucky, without even much of a sound—the men and the carpet were blown backward while they were still in their running postures.

Even if it was more effective than just pushing them back with wind, I knew it wouldn't buy much time. Looking up at me, she asked:

"Do you think a counterattack will work!?"

"I am the breath of the angel!"

I also used a strong wind to blow back the pursuers who were trying to recover. Then, facing Lina, I said:

"It doesn't matter what we do, we can't defeat them. If we can just stop them, that's enough."

"Stop them..."

"Is there a way?" I asked.

She replied quickly.

"Well, there's one! We freeze them! Provided they're willing to be frozen, that is!"

"We can't hurt them..... but conversely, we can stop them, huh."

I didn't think there was any other effective means. I nodded and looked back at the men.

"But how are you going to freeze them?"

The men had already crawled out from under the carpet and were trying to come at us again. Lina, however, seemed to have plenty of confidence.

"Get back for a second!"

She warned me with a low mutter and then, perhaps to draw the pursuers' attention, put some distance between us before letting out a high-pitched cry.

"Ice Cave Ivy!"

At the same moment she touched the floor, white veins stretched out from her hand like capillaries. The first few men in the lead who touched them were instantly frozen to the spot. She turned toward me and showed off a triumphant grin.

"And that’s that."

But the instant she said it—

I was about to let out a sigh of relief when I noticed something wrong, and that sigh turned into a groan.

"Gah!?"

The sound reached my ears—the sound of someone kicking over a shelf lined with glassware with all their might. Stepping over their frozen comrades in the front row, the pursuers from behind charged forward without hesitation. Their movements were more abrupt than swift. The man who reached the frozen Lina first swung a business bag over his head—apparently, it was a weapon. Indeed, in this world where nothing broke, anything could probably serve as a weapon.

(I knew it, who on earth is this girl!?)

She didn't scream. Or maybe I just didn't hear it. Regardless, I had no time to listen.

An instant ago, I had been behind her, but I held my breath and stepped out, leaping in front of Lina. I closed the distance by jumping half a step toward the three

identical men lunging at us, then struck each of them in the ankle with my heel. With a single strike from my boots—reinforced with steel frames—they all collapsed. I kicked them back toward where they came from, then turned back to Lina.

"Fall back further!" I shouted.

"Roger that!"

She replied and started running to widen the gap between us and the pursuers. She even tossed a wink my way as she went.

"Thanks, Orphen!"

"Yeah!"

I prepared my own escape as I responded.

"It’d be much simpler if they were all bunched up together!"

"Can you... actually do that!?" Lina asked me, sounding a little put off by the enemies' weapons.

"I have a bit of a time lag when I chant my spells!"

In this world where I had lost my sense of reality, I was already starting to get used to the means of countering the enemy.

I let my gaze flicker for a split second from the men to the top of the stairs.

"Get to the top of those stairs. I’ll hold them off here. How much time...?"

"Count to ten!"

"Ten seconds, then!"

Thinking that, I started running too.

The two of us reached the center of the hall, spun on our heels, and faced the pursuers. Simultaneously, the pursuers all reached their hands into their bags!

What they pulled out, one after another, were various weapons of nightmarish durability and utility! Chain weights, peelers, golf putters with nails in them... even sheets of calligraphy paper and raw chicken thighs!

"Ugh."

".....S-so it's that kind of vibe, huh....."

Lina and I groaned in unison.

All of those things were likely made of the same indestructible material as the walls and the men themselves. They had become solid hammers, and a single strike would undoubtedly shatter ordinary matter.

I definitely didn't want to die by being taken down by a chicken thigh or a peeler. Not as a human being.

I concentrated my mind. There was only one way to escape. I had to freeze these people and stop their movements.

"I see—"

My outstretched arm brushed the empty air. I traced the area where they were spreading out and created a band of gravity through my magical composition—something that could never exist in nature. Then, without a moment's delay—

"Chaos Princess!"

The gravity band converged into a single point in the void. It took the pursuers right along with it as it collapsed.

I leaped backward, putting distance between myself and the men who were now tangled in a clump.

"Two breaths' worth, I'd say."

I muttered as I took a defensive stance again. At the same time, Lina dashed toward the stairs as if she had been spring-loaded!

Lina's spell was complete! From her position at the top of the stairs, she spun around, her cloak and hair fluttering—

"Demon Crystal!"

The water scattered in the atmosphere gathered and froze in an instant, transforming

the clumped-up men into a giant ice snowman!

The snowman fell onto the floor with a hard, heavy sound.

Cold air swirled. For a moment, a deathly silence filled the room. There was no sign of the servants—our pursuers—moving again.

Lina let out a short breath and brushed the ice fragments from her head. My eyes met hers. She gave me a wink and a thumbs-up.

Whether out of exasperation or the cold, I gave her a wave with my shoulders still hunched.

Then—a chill ran down my spine. Down the center of my body. It definitely wasn't an aftereffect of the cold air. It was much colder and deeper than that.

"It's here! The troublesome one!"

"Troublesome....."

At Lina's words, I instinctively flicked my gaze toward the men-turned-snowman for a split second. A presence more troublesome than *that*—

Our gazes converged on the same point: the top of the stairs.

"——Ugh!?"

An involuntary groan escaped my lips. It was only natural.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

And in response—

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

That laugh—bittersweet like dried-up, hollowed-out whipped cream—was one I remembered well. Against my will, I recalled the scenes from my dreams and felt a wave of dizziness.

In an alternate world, there are things that stubbornly refuse to change. Or rather, I wondered why I had to bring something like *this* along even to another world. I looked up.

"You!?"

"You've got to be kidding me....."

I clenched my fists while beside me, I heard Lina groaning with an expression more haggard than I'd ever seen. I'm sure I looked the same, but regardless, the two who appeared didn't seem to care. As if they had planned it, they harmonized their loud laughter and showed themselves grandly.

Standing on the landing, looking for all the world like they were simply existing to excess, were the silver-haired butler and a woman with black hair dressed in an—extraordinarily—intense outfit.

If I remembered correctly, her name was Naga. The woman pointed a finger covered in a black glove sharply toward Lina.

"I finally found you! Lina Inverse and company!"

Then Keith followed up, arms crossed.

"A truly magnificent display of skill, Sir Black Sorcerer—and, well, that flat person."

"And company!?"

".....Flat person....."

For the moment, just as Lina was about to open her mouth to retort, Keith's voice cut her off.

"Do not worry!" he said, waving his hand. "First, look at this!"

He pointed his finger at his own feet and held it there. After a moment, as if confirming something, he began to retreat with awkward, haphazard movements.

[...]

[...]

Everyone remained silent. After looking up at him for a while, Keith suddenly turned to us and announced:

"The Moonwalk."

"You’re not even doing it right!" I shouted, but it didn't get through.

"In short, that is how it is!"

As Keith argued his point, Naga stared at him from beside him with a strange intensity. She nodded slowly and let out a cry of admiration.

"Hmph. As expected, Keith. Your movements have a different kind of sharpness."

She watched him with a gaze that seemed to acknowledge his prowess.

"I see, so you're both insane....." Lina whispered quietly, but her words didn't seem to reach the world of the two on the stairs.

"Do you understand now, Lady Naga?"

Keith struck a pose and groaned. Thinking his posture was strangely unnatural, I followed his finger with my eyes. He was pointing at those servants who had been frozen in ice.

"I have done what I could. Now, their gazes are fixed on me! Quick, unfreeze them!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Of course, Keith! It’s going according to plan, almost terrifyingly so!"

"So that’s what this is about....."

I muttered as I felt a wave of exhaustion slowly sinking in. While I was standing there dazed, Naga dutifully began to descend the stairs.

"Now, pay attention! Be captivated by Keith’s beautiful technique for a while!"

She called out as an afterthought, but by then I wasn't listening. I looked at Lina.

She was the first to speak.

".....Rock-paper-scissors..... the loser has to stop Naga..... how about that.....?"

She gestured with her eyes toward the block of ice where the men were clumped together and continued.

".....In any case..... it looks like it’ll be bad if those guys are unfrozen....."

To be blunt, the answer was no. It wasn't that she shouldn't be stopped; it was just

that I didn't want to get involved. Still, looking up, Keith was shouting proudly from the landing.

"Ha-ha-ha! And now, the ultra-high difficulty: Right Turn!"

He shouted this while continuing to do a "right face" turn.

In short.

(It’s a blood-soaked path after all.....)

I sighed inwardly and nodded.

".....I don't think either of us is going to win regardless of who goes....."

Even as I said that, I felt my confidence in my own words waver as I saw Naga, who had come down the stairs, take a position right next to us and begin chanting something like a spell. Maybe we really shouldn't get involved. Naga was concentrating her mind on the block of ice, seemingly convinced that we were indeed distracted by Keith, as she grandly recited her incantation. There wouldn't have been much difference if she had chanted it from the top of the stairs, but she had probably come down simply because it looked better from here. There seemed to be no other reason.

In response to Lina’s listless voice, I lazily threw out a fist.

"Alright, then. Rock-paper....."

I didn't even check the result, but Lina spoke first.

"Okay, you take care of Naga. Oh, and no need to hold back."

Apparently, I lost. I muttered to her.

"Fine, then you take care of Keith. Well, it won't make much difference whether you hold back or not with that guy."

".....I feel like the phrase 'it’s six of one and half a dozen of the other' was invented just for this moment....."

I let out a sigh as I stared blankly at Naga. The woman in the black outfit—one I hesitated to describe, though if I didn't hesitate, it would only take one word—looked

like she was about to finish her spell. I think Lina had called them "Chaos Words"? I didn't understand the meaning of the words she was whispering, so I had no way to judge.

However, I couldn't bring myself to panic much, so I just grumbled.

"No, if even one of them were slightly better, there might be some hope."

I clenched my fist tight; my magical composition was already complete.

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin!"

At the same time as my voice rang out—

An exploding shockwave sent the target flying.

"Ugyurubyiieeeeeeee!"

The hit felt perfect. Of course, magic has no reaction or recoil, but there is certainly a sensation when a hit lands. Like a rubber ball with limbs, she went bouncing across the floor, skidding and tumbling away. Before the echo of the explosion had even faded, she scrambled to her feet and came stomping back.

As she approached, Naga raised her voice.

"Hey! What was that for!?"

"That’s my line!" I shouted back.

"Your line...?"

She pointed firmly at the block of ice.

"I was just trying to quietly unfreeze this!"

Quietly? I associated her with my elder sister, whom I have a bit of a hard time with—she was roughly the same height as her—and although there wasn't a single thing about them that was actually alike, I groaned, feeling a bit intimidated.

"Where, in what way, on what scale, and in what sense was that 'quiet'!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It’s obvious! This part was 'where,' and that part was 'somewhat quietly'!"

She declared this with absolute certainty, pointing at the spot where she had been standing for "this part" and at the block of ice for "that part," then she brushed her hair back.

"Hmph..... regardless..... in times like this, it is common courtesy to look the other way. To think you don't even know that—you are a far cry from Keith."

"Nghhhhh."

I took about two steps back after being hit by her loud laughter at close range.

Suddenly, I realized the gravity of what she had said and snapped into a defensive stance. My face changed color as I shouted.

"Wait, to even for a second think I'm like him—I won't let you insult me that much!"

"Hmph. Don't misunderstand."

She continued arrogantly.

"I'm not saying you're the same. I said you don't even come close to Keith."

"As a member of the human race, that's only natural!"

Then—abruptly losing my strength—

"Hmph....."

I shook my head, hollowly aware of the strength draining out of me. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Whether it was fifty steps or fifty steps, I didn't know. If I made a fuss over every single step, this would never end.

"I see. It's an alternate world, after all. Fine. I've decided to accept it. Of course, the idiot Keith would try to unfreeze his allies..."

"I will eventually listen! Because that is the nature of the beast known as Lina Inverse!"

"Well then——how about this logic?" I countered. "What if I said I'll just leave you alone without ever hearing a reason!?"

"No, you *will* listen! I am certain Master Lina Inverse will absolutely listen!"

He pointed toward where Naga was.

"What if I said I absolutely *don't* want to hear it!?"

I hadn't seen that she had been dealt with just a moment ago, but I could tell by the sound and the presence.

As Lina persistently argued, Keith spoke with total confidence.

"It seems Lady Naga has fallen victim to that dead-end yakuza over there! That being the case, I intend to inherit her dying wish to the fullest! It is simply the instinct of a living creature!"

"Blast Ash!"

I unleashed the same spell as before, no questions asked.

Foom!

I knew it wouldn't work.

He pulled something out of his pocket that looked like a thick encyclopedia and flipped through the pages.

"Let's see. 'Lina Inverse, the Destruction Demi-Human. Very rarely, depending on the region, she is not a criminal. Flat. She will listen to reasons. Flat.'"

After finishing his little recitation, he glanced at Lina and let out a tiny, stifled laugh. "Pfft."

"Even an encyclopedia was made about me!?"

Even though she knew it was a provocation, Lina snapped and pointed a finger at Keith.

"Fine! I get it! In that case, I'm knocking you flat for real! And for the record, I won't listen to your reason out of pure spite!"

With that, she began to chant a spell.

"Ha-hahahaha! Slow, too slow, O Flat One!"

Keith shouted as he tucked the encyclopedia away somewhere and kept his right hand

inside his coat. His gaze was fixed on Orphen and the others.

The "blackness" produced by the spell vanished!

It was a mere distraction. The moment Keith’s form was enveloped in something black, I dashed! I sprinted up the stairs in one go, reaching Keith’s side. If I could just land a kick, I could at least knock him off the stairs, even if I couldn't defeat him.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Keith’s laughter rang out unchanged.

The black residue faded. Lina braced herself in a kicking stance—

"Wait... just a...! I thought you couldn't make a move because we had to be quiet..."

"Wouldn't be strange to find someone like that. It's an alternate world, after all."

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin."

"Hmph. Well, whatever."

"Nyurogyu....."

That incomprehensible woman actually seemed to have settled the conversation through an incomprehensible series of events. When she thrust her finger at me again, I spoke.

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin."

"This time, pretend you didn't notice!"

"Noce."

I said that, returned to my original position, and began to chant a spell.

In the end, after letting out a scream that sounded more like a groan and taking a heavy hit, Naga finally stopped moving. She lay face down on the floor, stretched out limply like a carcass or some discarded object.

I watched her for a while longer, then silently raised my right hand.

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin."

[.....]

I stared at her quietly, intently——

"Menyu....."

"Ugh!?"

Just as before, I unleashed a shockwave.

Naga, who had been incanting while completely defenseless, was sent tumbling spectacularly across the floor once again, helpless to stop it. After staggering and reeling for a bit, she turned around and tried to approach with wide strides again.

"Hey, you! Were you even listening to me!?"

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin."

I repeated the spell with a flat expression.

"Nonyurohyeeeeee!"

Naga went flying again, got up, and staggered about.

—And then, her finger twitched. I quickly raised my hand and took a stance again. But Naga, as if seeing this, stopped moving, so I stopped as well.

A few seconds of silence.

I could see the beads of sweat forming on the prone Naga. Was she thinking desperately, or was she just confused?

After a while, this seemed to be the decision she reached.

".....Meow. Meow."

At the cat impression, I finally lowered my guard.

I looked off toward the horizon and muttered to myself in a dazed tone.

"Oh, it was just a cat."

"A man-eating cat, maybe. In that case, I'd better shoot it."

"Eek!?"

Naga gasped in a hurry. Then, after another short silence to let her thoughts spin, she spoke.

"T-That's right... oh, if only there were... what should I do if I look down and there's nothing there... where should I vent my anger...?"

"There's a gold coin at your feet!"

"A gold coin, huh..."

"How about trying to vent it on that snowman over there for now!?"

Still in her "playing dead" pose, she used only her finger to point at the block of ice, while her tone had returned to something resembling normal. I let out a deep sigh of admiration.

"I see. That's a good idea. Well, I can do that after I check if there's a gold coin or not. Now, let's see... Huh? There actually is one."

"What!?"

Naga sprang up instantly—

"I call upon the Sisters of Ruin."

"Hiyaiiiiiii!"

She bit her tongue and flew through the air, burying herself deep in the carpet.

After confirming that Naga had completely stopped moving, I let out a long sigh that must have looked utterly hollow to anyone watching.

The world was wide.

That was Lina’s honest thought. Though she also felt it didn't necessarily *need* to be this wide.

She had met many strange people before. But the person currently dancing some

combination of breakdancing and a dance of darkness at the top of the stairs was likely a top-class contender among them.

I knew it by instinct, without even speaking. No, I didn't *want* to speak to him.

If he were a well-dressed young man who didn't talk, didn't move, and didn't breathe, he might have looked normal. But there aren't many people in the world who aimlessly leak such a bizarre aura.

At any rate, there was only one way to deal with this type of opponent. Namely: "I don't care, just stop moving for now."

I muttered quietly.

".....You said it didn't matter if I held back or not, right....."

I thought. Now, what kind of spell should I fire off?

The result I reached was—"Well, anything's fine."

Even if I made a mistake and he never moved again for the rest of his life, I didn't think anyone would complain. In fact, I felt like I might even be praised for it in certain circles.

No, I had no evidence for that.

"Alright then, no holding back... a sudden Blast Ash."

Whoosh!

A black something born in the void enveloped the young man's entire body for an instant. It was a vicious attack spell that reduced all organic matter within its range to dust.

When the dark smear vanished, there stood the silver-haired butler, arms crossed grandly, laughing.

"Whoa, it really doesn't work!"

I stepped back a bit.

".....Is he human? Is he human? .....Maybe I shouldn't try to deal with him

normally... In that case!"

I devised a plan and pointed sharply at the young man, who had resumed his "Moonwalk" or whatever it was.

"Next! Try spinning around on your back!"

"No, that is impossible."

He returned to a serious face and replied instantly.

To be turned down so seriously—he was not to be underestimated. In many ways.

A single bead of sweat rolled down Lina's cheek.

"I didn't think you'd be that honest about it....."

"I have to ask something fundamental: who on earth are you!?"

"Oh, forgive my late introduction."

The young man tapped his white-gloved hands together and spoke in an unfailingly polite tone.

"My name is Keith Royal. I am a butler serving the House of Margie. I hope for your kind acquaintance."

"The House of Margie!? Does that mean this castle belongs to them?"

"No, certainly not."

He shook his right hand vigorously as if to deny it with all his might.

"The Margie clan is a prestigious family of families rooted in Urbanrama. They are nouveau riche whom everyone fears and loves. When the money runs out, the relationship ends. I would be troubled if you lumped such a flawless, holy family name in with a black castle like this."

He spoke of a place name Lina had never heard of.

".....I see... a family from this 'Other World' then... Then you have no reason to be loyal to the pathetic self-proclaimed god of this place, do you!?"

I threw out another question.

Of course, Lina had no intention of persuading this man, let alone winning him over to her side. Behind her, Orphen had been cheerfully blowing Naga away for some time now. In other words, this conversation was just a way to kill time until that side was settled.

Once that happened, it wouldn't be a bad idea to push the task onto the now-free Orphen, saying, "Hey, take care of this one too while you're at it." Or rather, passing him the baton.

Whether the young man—Keith—realized Lina's calculation or not, he continued.

"Hmph. It is not my intent to be misunderstood. My loyalty is pledged to only one thing—the name of the House of Margie. Even in this wicked nest of an alternate world, that remains unchanged."

"Then why?"

"Undying loyalty... refers only to unchanging loyalty. I would never betray my master for even a second....."

He shook his head gracefully from side to side.

"Wouldn't I?"

He asked with a perfectly serious face.

".....No... why are you asking me.....? I'm not a butler to begin with."

Lina spoke with a troubled face. I knew this wasn't becoming a proper conversation, but—

"Hmm. To say you are not a butler... I wonder what kind of education your parents gave you..."

He muttered something under his breath, but I had no intention of entertaining him. I pointed at the servants who had been turned into a snowman and asked the next question.

"Anyway, if that's the case, why are you thinking of melting *that*!?"

"Do you wish to know?"

"I'd be happy if you told me!"

Lina replied instantly to the serious-faced Keith. I had a strong hunch that hearing it would make me feel sad rather than happy, but I said it anyway.

"In that case, first, you must defeat me!"

Like a giant bird of black wings, Keith flapped his tuxedo, swung his arms up, and shouted.

Lina immediately pointed a finger at him.

"That attitude! It's not butler-like at all!"

I didn't expect such a thing from the start.

"That cannot be! This is what a butler is!"

Keith countered instantly, perhaps because she had struck a sore spot, or maybe it was just a pose.

"The fact that you're getting stubborn about it is especially un-butler-like!"

As Lina pressed the point, Keith didn't flinch.

"For example!"

"Ugh, this is irritating!"

With theatrical movements, he swung his arms and rested one foot on the railing, taking the pose of a sailor gazing at the horizon from a pier. Lina felt a vein pop in her temple.

"Hmph... I know it's foolish. But the world's greatest man is waiting in the ring... Every man is just a little fool who wants to be a big fool. Yes. That is what being a butler is. I’m going. I’m going to win against that Bonaborza Willard."

After performing an unidentified little play, he turned back to Lina.

"And so, once again, a butler enters the jungle of the white mat."

".....What exactly is a butler from another world.....?"

Lina groaned in a weary voice.

".....You said to defeat you if I wanted to know the reason, right....."

The blackness vanished. The laughter died out.

Suddenly, there was no human figure there.

".............Eh...?"

I muttered in daze, stopping mid-motion in an awkward pose as I was about to kick.

Pa-pa-pa-charara-charara-paa!

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Keith's laughter overlapped with an unidentified fanfare that rang out!

A tapestry near the block of ice that sealed the servants fell away without warning, and Keith appeared from behind it, his right hand still tucked in his coat!

"Whoa, what are you!?"

"Whoa!?"

Lina and Orphen were visibly startled.

Ignoring their agitation, Keith wore a small smile.

"Hmph. It is nothing more than an ordinary body-double technique."

"No, a fanfare wouldn't normally play," Orphen retorted immediately.

That sound just now... was definitely at least several trumpets and various percussion instruments.

"W... What on earth.....?"

Lina looked around, searching for the source, but of course, there was nothing of the sort.

"And now! All that’s left is a block of ice of this caliber! I shall melt it instantly with

the overwhelming heat source I have prepared here!"

Regardless of the bewildered pair, Keith drew his right hand from his coat with the speed of lightning and thrust what he held toward the ice!

Namely: a lit incense stick.

Not knowing how to react, Lina tried muttering something.

".....Um....."

Orphen simply watched in silence.

The incense stick let out a lazy trail of smoke. Did it smell of musk or sandalwood? Well, it didn't really matter.

It was only after quite some time that Keith noticed the quiet stares of the two.

"Well, I was worried one wouldn't be enough, so I brought two."

He followed up perfectly. Looking closely after he said it, there were indeed two incense sticks. Theoretically, this doubled the firepower. Well, it still didn't really matter.

".....Looks like we could just leave him be."

Lina slowly descended the stairs, barely listening to Orphen's words. I chanted a spell—well, it didn't really matter, but I chanted it anyway—and splashed a modest amount of water gathered from the surrounding space onto the incense.

".....Aqua Create."

Splash.

"Ah!? My army's trump card!"

Keith panicked as he saw the extinguished incense.

".....Hmm..... Strategically, you were getting close to something there."

Lina offered a meaningless bit of agreement.

At any rate, regardless of how it happened, the battle here was settled. Or at least, it

should have been.

But.

"How pathetic!"

It was exactly at that moment that a voice overturning everything echoed through the hall.

CHAPTER 4: Humiliation

It was a voice.

A cry unleashed.

A spear piercing a lonely shield.

Thunder in the azure sky.

Well, it probably wasn't actually that grand.

But it was definitely a voice. A single word that froze the room. I turned around. The voice had come from the passage deep at the top of the stairs, the same place where Keith and Naga had appeared. That meant there was some kind of escape route back there. I couldn't count on it, though. The depths of the passage were in a blind spot from below, and I couldn't peek inside. However, the voice, which clearly had no need for a challenge, repeated itself.

"Utterly, completely pathetic!"

Keith reacted swiftly to Lina's mutter.

"Ngh!"

He groaned in shock—yet with resolve.

"So... it has finally appeared. Our true enemy!"

"Huh? Enemy?"

Perhaps it was because I wasn't used to it yet. Or rather, getting used to this perverted butler wasn't exactly a path to happiness.

"The -ish thing!!" Lina shouted back.

"Ahhh-ugh!" Keith cried, clenching his fists.

Regardless of that, Lina was questioning him. I spoke up quietly. For the time being, I took the opportunity to grind my knuckles into the temple of the serious-faced Keith

as he held his pose.

"Don't bother engaging with him seriously; you'll just waste your life."

"You're right," she said.

Actually, she might have been more used to this than I thought. She nodded simply.

The "Voice of God"—I still felt some resistance calling it that—continued from the blind spot, paying no heed to our circumstances.

"Hmph... even though an ideal inhabitant has finally appeared, I suppose perfection cannot be expected yet. In the end, it is but a model. Without passing through my hands, true ideals cannot be embodied. That, I understand. I am the ruler of this world. I am God—"

It sounded like a lie. Or like a hymn. It wasn't particularly pleasant to the ear, but it echoed sonorously.

Then Lina called out the enemy's name, as if driving a wedge into frozen time.

The voice suddenly changed its tone and screamed at the top of its lungs. Regarding that voice, it might truly have belonged to an absolute being in terms of its unmistakable nature. I caught my breath.

"It became -ish-ish!?"

"Even if you make it complicated, it's still wrong!"

He repeated himself.

Both of us were being unreasonably denied; I figured we felt the same way. When I looked over naturally, Lina was casting a puzzled glance my way. She asked as if to confirm.

"...Was it different?"

I grimaced at the question. I shook my head.

"The '-ish thing' part should be correct. I thought the problem was the arrangement... Should we go with 'not-so-ish thing' instead?"

Lina also crossed her arms, deep in thought.

"Don't try to find a middle ground and then go even further away!"

The voice became even more hysterically strained.

"The -ish thing!"

He was apparently throwing a tantrum. I could hear the sound of feet stomping on the floor.

"That kind of thing is what makes me the angriest! I am Voim. The Absolute and All-Powerful! Tremble in awe, you bottom-tier creatures of the outer world!"

And then—

Voim appeared from the blind spot. He looked the same as before.

No. He was a little different.

His hair was exploded, his clothes were falling apart, he was covered in soot, and his beard was mangled.

I watched this "god" as he puffed out his chest grandly and looked down upon us with an arrogant gaze. I pondered for a moment, then snapped my head up.

(I see. That's it.)

I had found the answer. I announced it in a loud voice.

"The scorched-ish thing!?"

"You are so persistent!"

Voim shrieked, his twisted beard shaking.

"In short, it means this! None of your powers will work against my creations! As long as I will it so!"

"...Hm?"

I blinked. Lina raised her voice again. It wasn't necessarily because of what he said. A sensation of wrongness, something I couldn't quite identify, whispered to me.

"If you're going to oppose it that strongly, how about we meet in the middle with 'The scorched thing that seems -ish'!?"

"What would that even achieve!?"

Voim screamed back, his eyes turning bright red. Once he had shouted, he seemed to calm down slightly, though his breathing remained ragged.

"You don't seem to understand. No matter how long you struggle, it is ultimately nothing more than prolonging a futile effort!"

"So you're saying no matter how much we struggle, it's useless...?"

A single bead of sweat rolled down Lina's face.

"So you won't let us call you '-ish' no matter what!?"

"Is *that* the part you're focusing on!?"

Voim retorted, swinging his hand out to the side.

"Listen well! I told you I am all-powerful! You are nothing more than absolutely powerless beings who defy the Absolute Being."

I couldn't put it into words yet, but my body moved instantly.

"I release the white blade of light."

I muttered under my breath. A wave of photothermal energy blew Voim—who had been grandly orating while gesturing wildly on the landing—right off his feet. The god, who was now even more scorched and collapsed, scrambled up and raised a voice of protest.

"What do you think you're doing!?"

"...Uhh..."

Lina seemed to have reached the same conclusion. After making a gesture as if thinking for a moment—

"Flare Lance!"

A torrent of flames attacked him.

"Nohyeeeeee!"

The silhouette of the god melted into the flames. The charred remains of Voim were in a state that suggested he was barely clinging to life. His vigor, however, was undiminished.

"What are you doing *again*!?"

"I knew it."

It was Lina who nodded. Our gazes met naturally.

I heard Voim groaning in a worried tone, sensing a sinister atmosphere as he put a hand to his mouth. I slowly raised my arm and pointed a finger. The tip of my finger came to a stop, pointing directly at—

Voim stared at my fingertip, followed the line of sight, and eventually stopped when he realized I was pointing at him. He finally seemed to understand, though he shook his head violently in denial.

"W... What?"

I sighed and spoke. It wasn't a big deal. It was just a single truth.

"Even if it's impossible for us to harm anything in this world because it's your creation, there is one single natural object in this world that isn't included in that, right?"

Voim blinked. His long eyelashes were also singed into an irregular line.

It was a simple thing.

No matter who the god was, as long as that god existed, there was one thing—and only one—that the god could not control by will alone.

"W-What is that...?"

In response to Voim's question, I looked toward the corner of my vision. Lina was doing the same thing beside me at the exact same time.

"I release the white blade of light."

Once again, the photothermal wave instantly enveloped the -ish thing.

The explosion was merciless. It repeated the same phenomenon that had occurred before, and a vortex of flame pushed Voim's body backward.

Lina muttered a finishing blow as she watched the completely scorched—and partially still-on-fire—Voim.

"He did say, 'against my creations,' after all."

"Ugh... ugh..."

After being burned for a third time, it took Voim a while to recover. He lay smoldering on the landing for a bit. I looked down—well, technically I was looking up, but I looked down on him emotionally—and opened my mouth.

"Hey, -ish thing... no. Ish."

Voim raised his head, trembling.

"Y-Yes?"

"Hey, Ish. Yeah... 'Ish' is fine, right?"

"Ehh...?"

"It's fine, right?"

"Yes."

Lina clapped her hands together.

To the now-obedient god, I smiled and continued.

"I want us to go home."

"Oh, and of course, there are plenty of other options," Lina added cheerfully from the side. "Like being peeled alive or crushed into pieces—if it's something a doctor can handle, it’s a total 'okay' in my book! ♪"

"Ehh... But, well, for me, I thought it would be better if you guys, after showing a bit of a rebellious spirit, realized my greatness and became samples for me in a more solemn manner..."

"I really wish we could have done that for you!"

I said something I didn't mean in the slightest and nodded with a faint smirk.

"Now, now, Orphen. It's a bit cruel to force him like that."

Lina reached out a hand toward Voim with even more "mercy."

"He should have the right to choose. Either send us home, or get scorched some more right here."

"I-Is that really a choice between two options...?"

Voim asked with a trembling voice. His tone had been downgraded significantly before I knew it, but I didn't particularly care. I tilted my head.

"I mean... if possible, I'd prefer an option a bit more within the range of what a doctor could handle..."

"Ground down? Into thin strips?"

"Ughhh... all of these sound like things a doctor would tell me to stop doing during a check-up..."

Listening to Voim's voice, which had now turned into a sob, I closed my eyes and relaxed. It had been an incredibly tedious series of events, but regardless, everything seemed to be settling down smoothly. Probably.

(We managed to pull it off, I guess...)

Satisfied, I rubbed my eyes through my closed lids—and muttered to myself. After running around so much, I felt more sleepy than exhausted.

(I seriously thought we were done for. But if this is all that happens when Keith's involved, it's a good outcome. Really... wait, Keith?)

It suddenly occurred to me.

Where did Keith go?

Even if I had been distracted by Voim's appearance, I had been careless. I had left that perverted butler unattended?

The instant I raised my head to look around, cursing myself.

Both my arms were twisted up behind me, and I was slammed onto the floor without any way to resist. During the fall to the floor, the only thing I could do was curse whatever was toying with my fate.

I honestly didn't know if this was a god or what.

"Damn it—!"

I let out a groan of resentment that felt like blood seeping out.

A presence.

Yes. What I felt behind me wasn't bloodlust or hostility; it was a mere presence.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

But then.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Lina's instinct caught the scent of danger within it.

The loud laughter of Keith and Naga rang out!

I tried to twist my body instinctively—

"What...?"

Thud!

"Augh!"

I took a blow to the shoulder and fell flat on my face.

It wasn't a blade. It was something blunt. If I hadn't twisted my body at that moment, it probably would have hit the back of my head.

And then.

"What!?"

I heard Orphen's voice from the side. I looked over and saw him collapsed. He was being pinned down from behind by two of the subordinates.

When I looked toward the voices, the ice that had sealed the men was mostly melted. Standing by the melting ice were Naga and Keith, holding bundles of incense sticks!

From one end to the other, the men were reviving one after another.

"Hmph! You were both careless! Of all things, to forget about us!"

"It seems you let your guard down, Sir Black Sorcerer! The razor-thin relationship between the Black Sorcerer and myself, where we aim for each other's lives at every opportunity... razor-thin! Thin! Razor-thin-n-n... well, maybe being one character short is..."

"I don't care about that!"

Orphen screamed in desperation.

Lina instinctively tried to pick herself up, but one of the subordinates immediately pinned her down from behind.

"...I didn't hear any spells being cast...! How did you melt the ice...?"

At that groan, Naga puffed out her chest even further.

"Hmph! Can't you see just by looking, Lina Inverse!? Look at what we have in our hands!"

"It seems your miscalculation was thinking there were only two incense sticks!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Keith declared proudly, a look of composure on his face.

"That leads to a shining tomorrow!"

"No, whether it's two or twenty, it's the same thing," Orphen muttered from beside me with some calm, but Lina wasn't quite so composed.

"You don't have it *now*!?"

Orphen retorted immediately.

Lina grit her teeth hard.

And then, at the top of the stairs.

"...Is my cold-air magic less than an incense stick...?"

"Hmph! Look well... at the number of these incense sticks!"

"Lord Voim, I am glad to see you are safe."

Keith and Naga each gripped about ten incense sticks in each hand.

One of the released men gave a polite greeting to his master.

In other words: a total of forty sticks.

"Truly, a forty-fold scorching hell!"

"I told you it's the same thing!"

"...Then, seven trillion-fold!"

"Don't lie!"

As Keith and Orphen went back and forth, Naga chimed in from the side.

"In that case, would you be satisfied if I said it was the power of the friendship between Keith and myself!?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Where in the world is there any friendship between you two!?"

Orphen and Lina screamed in unison.

The charred creature calling itself "God" was finally starting to grasp the flow of events thanks to Subordinate Number One's words.

He thought for a bit, then thought some more.

"Ho... ho-ho. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

He finally realized he was saved and nodded deeply.

"It seems everything has proceeded according to script!"

"There are too many liars!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha."

Orphen involuntarily shouted at the god's arrogant attitude, while Lina could only let out a dry laugh.

In the meantime, the scorching heat (an exaggeration) produced by the forty incense sticks, which surpassed even a fixed star, melted the block of ice in the blink of an eye. One by one, the men who had been sealed in the frozen hell were released.

As soon as they were free, they resumed their positions around us as if nothing had happened. They held their weapons at the ready.

Just how many of them were there?

Now that things had come to this, there was no way for Orphen and Lina to escape.

"As ordered, we have captured two escape samples."

"I shall grant you my praise!"

The fake god threw out words of magnanimous praise to the subordinate who reported exactly what he saw.

"I am beyond honored to receive your praise."

The reply was a formal response and a bow.

The "God," having regained his composure, looked down at the two pinned-down captives with a gaze as if he had found a rare beast on the side of the road.

"Oh my? Whatever happened, dear guests?"

"Guh."

"Tch... damn it."

Ignoring their groans and fixing the shape of his beard, he continued.

"I don't recall inviting guests who do nothing but stick to the floor and look up at their host... Now, then. I wonder how long it will take for you to remember. A day... a year... fifty years?"

In a droll, mocking tone, as if to toy with us, he spoke.

"You understand, don't you? Once you are shut inside the prison I have built, you have no means of escape. Absolutely—none. Nowhere. Hmph."

He looked up meaningfully—though, in reality, it meant nothing—at a point far off in the distance.

"However. I am not such a fool as to keep guests locked in a cell. Rather, those like you, whose actions are unpredictable, might be closer to the ideal as samples..."

As he spoke, he obsessively smoothed his curled, irreparable beard with his fingertips.

"Now, then. Nevertheless. I cannot be certain whether or not you are the guests I invited. What ought I to do...?"

"Get on with it."

Orphen clicked his tongue, urging him forward, clearly bored with the roundabout preamble.

"Hmph. If you are my guests... then surely you know my name?"

The man claiming to be God wore a cruel smile for the first time.

"If you can call me by my name properly, perhaps I might be convinced that you are indeed my guests."

"So he was holding a grudge after all," Orphen groaned, grinding his teeth.

"Instead of going through the trouble of building a jail and locking us up, don't you think returning us to our original world is a pretty nice idea?"

Lina tried saying it just to see, but the god-like thing merely laughed with a bright expression.

"I see, that is indeed rational. Hmph. However, it seems there are other choices? Yes, yes. There are various types of cells. The 'shaved-thin cell,' the 'peeled-away cell,' the 'crushed-to-pieces cell.' Do not worry. You shall not die. I will not let you die."

It seemed he possessed at least some modicum of memory, as he threw her own words

back as a sarcasm.

But Lina was not the type to be discouraged by such minor snark.

"You shouldn't dwell on the past. Look. You have to live positively with that 'mutual cooperation' spirit people always talk about—"

"Indeed, indeed. I, too, am not thinking of the past. Only the future—now, I wonder what duration of confinement would be appropriate?"

[.....]

At those words, delivered with a downward gaze and a lingering smile, Lina looked genuinely repulsed.

".....So... in the end... you just want us to say your name properly...?"

"My, my... I wonder. I simply said that if you were my guests, you surely wouldn't be ignorant of my name."

"Don't think we're going to play nice!"

Despite Orphen's intimidation, the parody of a god remained smiling.

"Yes, yes. Struggle all you like. I believe a space of about two meters square is quite fitting for a prisoner."

"Gugugu."

".....Sp....."

Orphen and Lina both groaned.

They knew. They knew that in this situation, no matter how many words they piled up, it was nothing more than buying time—the howling of a loser.

Without a word, the two of them exchanged glances—as if resigning themselves to something, Orphen closed his eyes.

"V... Voi..."

"Hohohohoh?"

The man pretending to be God leaned forward, his eyes sparkling.

[.....]

Following Orphen's lead, Lina also let out a breath.

She knew. She knew how meaningless it was to stubbornly refuse and end up locked in an indestructible cell.

And yet.

To call out the name of this charred, pathetic man pretending to be a god. It was such a small thing.

Was it just Lina's imagination that this tiny act felt like discarding something precious as a human being—no, that it felt equivalent to blaspheming the very world?

"...Voi..."

Orphen seemed to feel the same.

"Voi... is the Voi of Voi..."

Lina also began to sing a mysterious song.

The entity falsely claiming divinity merely watched the hesitating pair arrogantly, sensing it was now only a matter of time.

At that moment—the anomaly occurred.

"That's enough! Demon King Voim!"

A piercing shout cut through the tension. It felt like deja vu from when Voim first appeared, but the feeling this voice brought was entirely different. The girl's shout rang out clearly, but even as I looked around, there was no sign of her.

Lina muttered, perhaps recognizing the voice.

".....That voice...?"

[.....]

Though I didn't recognize it, I could at least feel that the situation had changed. Orphen tried to move his pinned head as much as possible to find the source of the

voice, but it was a futile effort. He was pressed firmly against the floor and couldn't move.

Only Voim, the primary-colored god—or god-like thing—looked unsatisfied.

"Yes. I am Voim... Demon King?"

He muttered blankly, as if suddenly noticing something mid-sentence.

The voice denounced him as if declaring his very existence a sin.

"It is useless to play dumb! The sun shining in the heavens sees through everything! The countless evil deeds you have committed!"

Thinking back to the view outside clouded by mist, I vaguely understood what she wanted to say, but I couldn't speak. Or rather, there was no opening to speak—

"Tou!"

With a shout, a white presence of some kind rattled my danger-sensing nerves. My field of vision was fixed looking downward, so I couldn't have seen it, but I felt a white shadow free-falling with great force from the ceiling. Or perhaps I caught it in the corner of my eye. But such doubts were quickly erased from my memory.

Gyu-gori.

It was the sound of a spine twisting.

Something fell and stepped right through my back along with the man pinning me down, making me let out a silent scream.

I glanced over and saw the girl from before trotting toward the subordinate pinning Lina.

(.....I'm one to talk, but...)

I didn't understand what was going on at all, either. A girl even younger than Lina had appeared out of nowhere and was denouncing the god of this world.

I was technically released and free, but the first thing I did was roll around on the floor in agony.

"Noooooo!"

"......Who are you?"

As I struggled to get up, a voice reached me before the girl could answer.

".....Huh?.....I was supposed to land coolly in front of that Demon King..... oh well, this is fine because it worked out in the end!"

"ORPHEEEEEEN!"

Constance and Bonnie appeared from another passage, scurrying along. With this, it was certain that the situation had swung violently from an improvement to a disaster. Orphen held his head in his hands, unable to say anything.

The girl in front of me, dressed in what looked like white ceremonial robes, clapped her hands and made a bright declaration with clenched fists.

"Tou!"

I could only tilt my head for now. She looked like a lovely—or rather, cute—child, but she was the one who had suddenly dropped from the ceiling, collided with the god's subordinates, sent them flying, and nearly crushed my spine.

The situation had certainly changed.

Rising with my now-free body, I felt my cheek twitch in a cynical smile. The situation might have changed, but I couldn't be sure if this was help or just more trouble.

Voim's subordinates seemed to be just standing by and watching. Even the ones who had been kicked aside remained down, making no move to get up. It seemed they couldn't act without an order from their master regarding this situation.

The crucial figure, Voim, was simply blinking in bewilderment. Was he unable to grasp the situation? A strangely metallic sound—*gochi*—echoed in the silence.

[.....]

".....Are you okay?"

Abandoning his incense sticks, Keith ran over.

"I was so worried about you both!"

He wailed, shedding a massive amount of tears.

Orphen asked the girl who was crouching in silence, clutching the hand she had used to punch a subordinate—it must have really hurt. He felt strangely detached from it all.

"......I'm fine..."

The girl replied in a tearful voice—whether she was being brave or just miscalculating was a toss-up. Beside her, I saw a figure that had appeared out of nowhere pass by quickly. I hadn't felt his presence at all until that moment.

He was a tall man with long blonde hair. He wore armor and held only something like a strange sword hilt in his hand. He lightly hooked it against the shoulder of the subordinate who was still pinning Lina down without moving. With practiced skill, he broke the man's balance and easily sent his body rolling onto the floor.

".....Huh..... So they were friends..... I had no idea."

"Ugyu."

Lina took the chance to get up and muttered.

"......Gourry, Amelia? You guys came too?"

"Hmph! We are Lina's old friends!"

She shouted to the man and girl who had appeared.

The man opened his mouth while stopping Voim's subordinates who were approaching Lina again, presumably trying to carry out their initial orders. It felt like these subordinates might lose the ability to make self-judgments when faced with a sudden, unexpected situation. After looking warily at the subordinate who had stopped moving after being pushed in the face by his palm, Lina spoke to the blonde man.

"I managed. Thanks, Gourry."

So his name was Gourry. I wouldn't know anything else about him—except that he was an extraordinarily skilled fighter. That was obvious just by looking.

The girl in the white ceremonial robes had apparently recovered from the pain, as she

finally rubbed her teary eyes dry and looked up. Amelia, was it? She spotted Naga and blinked her eyes in wonder. It was probably quite a task to find a single part of that outfit—the strange feather mask and all—that wasn't weird.

Amelia pointed at the black-haired woman and asked Lina.

".....Lina..... Who is that person?"

Before Lina could answer, Naga let out a strangely agitated cry.

[.....]

Lina let out a groan.

It seemed that almost everyone was an acquaintance—thinking that way made some sense of it all. At any rate, by then, the subordinates who had been blown away by the girl's fall were getting up and approaching us. Orphen nimbly dodged the man who lunged at him with clumsy movements, tripped him by stepping on his calf from behind, and then pinned him down with the sole of his boot before turning back to Constance and the others.

"So... why are you guys here?"

"I don't know."

"I truly wonder if it is because Master Orphen is here, honestly."

Before he could respond to the two of them speaking at once, he saw another subordinate about to leap toward him. He focused his consciousness to release magic—but stopped when he saw the structure of a spell being woven from the side that wasn't his own. It was the butler's voice that rang out.

"Interrupt!"

Still in the pose of reaching out his hand, the subordinate stiffened and fell over on the spot. From beyond him, Keith spoke, wiping his eyes with a white handkerchief—yet absolutely never letting a tear be seen.

"Ah, friendship is always like this, at all times."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. You're telling me not to tattle, right?"

Not wanting to mimic Lina, I said it with half-closed eyes.

Before I knew it, the situation had become nothing but chaos. Amidst it all, the girl called Amelia seemed to remember what she had been doing. She puffed out her chest with resolve, stretched her short fingers as far as they would go, and pointed sharply at Voim on the stairs.

"—Anyway, I don't really know what's going on, but now that it's come to this, you won't get away! Demon King Voim!"

Up until then, Voim had been standing there in a daze with his mouth wide open. He suddenly snapped back to his senses.

"Demon King? Demon King!?"

He finally seemed to realize she was referring to him. His face changed color and his body trembled.

"How rude! I am Voim. The Absolute Being and Creator of this world—!"

Listening while pinning the subordinate's leg with his boot, Orphen added casually:

"You burn pretty easily, though."

Lina also seemed to want to say something, but she kept her mouth shut, perhaps wanting to avoid further confusion. The others remained still, having nothing in particular to do. Amidst them, only Amelia was shouting with excessive energy.

"That is exactly why you are a Demon King!"

She continued with confidence, as if she had grasped decisive evidence.

"You burn easily! In other words, you're black! Furthermore, you call yourself an Absolute Being! If that's not a Demon King, what is!?"

[.....]

Feeling a bit concerned, Orphen looked down at his own clothes and remained silent.

Actually, she wasn't the only one making a scene; Voim on the landing was raising his voice even higher.

"Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong! I am the god of this world, the adjuster of this world!

Rather, it is you who defy me and disrupt the order of my world—"

"Be quiet!"

Amelia cut him off sharply.

"The numerous evil deeds of tearing apart insect parents and children and exploiting leaf mold are already clear!"

"Insects... leaf mold...?"

Voim was momentarily at a loss for words, perhaps not quite understanding. But he quickly tried to brush it off with a wave of his arm.

"Enough! You speak nothing but nonsense!"

I heard Lina whispering to the one called Gourry.

"Is that what this is about?"

"Who knows..."

"I don't understand it either," I said to Constance.

She answered with an ambiguous expression—a look that suggested she didn't really care—mixed with a sigh.

"Ah... well, was that how it was?"

"Yes. There is no mistake," Bonnie testified firmly from behind.

Combining Constance's doubtful tone with Bonnie's definite testimony, there was no way to interpret it as anything other than something completely off the mark.

However, Amelia's conviction didn't seem to waver in the slightest.

"So you intend to keep feigning ignorance!"

An accusatory light burned in her eyes.

"In that case! I shall correct the logic of this world with the fist of justice on behalf of the heavens!"

Furthermore, even her raised fist seemed to harbor an equivalent glow of flame. At

least, that was the kind of intensity she projected. Orphen rubbed both his eyes with his fingers through his eyelids, feeling as if he had actually seen it.

No matter how unreasonable that fighting spirit was, Voim himself seemed quite overwhelmed. He hurriedly waved his hands in a gesture of denial.

"Wait a moment! The heavens? Justice? For your information, I am the god and the justice of this world! Especially regarding the logic of the world, that is exactly my... uh, er, that's cheating, you!"

But even I, who had only seen the girl for a few minutes, knew that such a thing wouldn't change anything now. As Orphen scratched the back of his head and watched the progress, Amelia changed her pose slightly and shouted without further discussion.

"To even claim to be God—your arrogance is unforgivable! Elmekia Lance!"

It was likely a spell. She fired a pure white bolt of light that left no afterimage. Voim let out a cry that sounded like a sob, clutching his head.

"But I'm God!!"

Then, a jet-black shadow suddenly cut in front of the primary-colored god.

A momentary clash.

The subordinate who had been standing near Voim caught the light she fired in his palm with ease. And then, in a casual tone, he muttered:

"Unruly people attempting to harm Lord Voim. How shall we deal with them, Lord Voim?"

"Capture them!"

Voim replied instantly. Hiding behind the subordinate as if wailing, he cried:

"If words do not reach them, we have no choice but to make them understand through their bodies!"

".....Understood."

That voice did not come from a single subordinate.

It was a murmur that escaped from every one of them at once, without a hitch.

They began to move in unison.

The fleeting, faithful servants created by the self-proclaimed god.

One was under my foot.

".....Whoa."

I felt a chill of cold sweat as I sensed the man beneath me starting to move.

Another confronted Naga.

"Huh? Me too?"

Naga looked bewildered, but of course, the attitude of the faithful servants did not waver.

And another stood before Keith.

"Lady Constance, Lady Bonnie. The human heart is sometimes like the waves, coming and going."

"While you're busy betraying us in such a roundabout way, it looks like you've missed your window to join the other side, doesn't it?"

Casting a sideways glance at the scene, I made a cold declaration with half-closed eyes.

"Be careful! Attacks don't work on these guys at all!"

Lina shouted at the top of her lungs, warning everyone in the room.

"How exactly are we supposed to be 'careful' then?"

To Gourry's perfectly natural question, even Lina didn't have a way to answer.

".....I guess it means don't try to take them head-on?"

I scratched my head and muttered as the men edged closer.

"Well, with this many of them, I'll just keep going like I did before—"

My voice trailed off in vain.

The reason was clear to Lina as well.

Beyond the approaching men, more of the same-faced fellows were surging forth out of thin air, manifesting in response to the will of the one calling himself God.

The number was ten, twenty, or perhaps even more.

"It's alright!"

The person who responded to Lina's shocked voice was Amelia, speaking sonorously.

"Because we have justice on our side!"

Of course, if having justice were enough to win, the world would have been full of good people a long time ago.

[.....]

Whatever they felt about Amelia's words, the two sisters, Coggie and Bonnie, slipped smoothly behind my back to hide.

"Do your absolute best, Orphen."

"We shall be right here, giving you our lukewarm support."

"Go home."

I replied instantly and with refreshing bluntness.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Breaking through the despair and tension, Naga’s loud laughter rang out!

Her cape and black hair fluttering, she dashed toward Lina.

"Look. Do your best, Lina."

It seemed she just wanted to laugh.

Looking down at the chaos at the bottom of the stairs as a manifestation of his own power, the one impersonating God raised his voice.

"Ho-ho-ho! Realize your own powerlessness, won't you!?"

His attitude was exactly like that of a god handing down judgment.

"Go!"

Reacting to that command, Lina unleashed a spell to seize the initiative!

"Freeze Brid!"

The cold air generated by the spell encased several of the huddled men in ice.

It couldn't be called a finishing blow, but it was the only effective means we had. That meant we had no choice but to repeat it steadily.

The master cast a casual glance toward his frozen subordinates.

But in that instant—

Bagin!

The ice sealing them shattered without warning, releasing the men from their bonds!

"No way!"

The cry escaped Lina's lips.

She realized that this was the work of the power belonging to the self-proclaimed god.

"There is nothing here that does not go as I wish. You should be able to understand that by now, shouldn't you?"

He wore a smile of composure—though it still lacked any actual dignity.

"Even though you were totally scorched just a moment ago!"

"Being scorched couldn't be helped! That was not my failing!"

The fake god argued back heatedly, having clearly had a sore spot touched.

".....So that's how it is....."

But then—

"However, since you have made such a fool of me, you won't get off with just being scorched!"

Amelia raised her voice to no one in particular. She looked back and forth between the servant approaching as if nothing had happened and the scorched, boasting master. She stopped her gaze on the servant.

"That one actually looks more like a Demon King!"

Regaining her composure nonetheless—

"Vis frank!"

Mana gathered in the girl's fist! It roared out to crush the enemy!

She brandished her fist, burning with magic—

Goji!

It hurt, after all.

Apparently, there was no correlation between a heart that loves justice and the ability to learn. She withdrew with silent, teary eyes.

The man I had pinned under my foot had almost managed to break free. I gave up on him entirely, took a step back, and readied myself once more.

Coggie and Bonnie followed me—moving with strange quickness at times like this.

The servant rose—with a smoothness that was more than human—and lunged at me.

"Shi!"

I kicked his lead foot away, sent him tumbling again, and then took a deep breath.

"Daaaaaaaah!"

Letting out a shout of spirit, I stomped on him relentlessly—ten, twenty, dozens of times—with my steel-toed boots!

The moment I took a breath and stopped, the man rose up with no change in his expression, quite casually.

Panting, I turned around and slapped the hand of the dazed Coggie.

"Switch."

"Eeeeh!?"

The servant dutifully turned his gaze toward Coggie.

I knew full well that this was nothing more than a temporary measure.

Maintaining his distance from the opponent, Gourry drew close to Lina.

"Shouldn't we fly off and escape!?"

"Impossible! Not with this many allies!"

The answer came back instantly and despairingly.

Hearing Gourry’s voice, I added:

"And even if we did escape, where would we go? —"

As I said it, I suddenly noticed something.

I swept my gaze around to Coggie... no, to Bonnie.

"No, not that. Since you knew about that idiot, you must have heard it from someone, right? Tell me the circumstances or whatever."

Ignoring Coggie's screams in the background, Bonnie held an insect that had landed on her shoulder.

"Oh, that. Well, this child's family is down in this basement."

"Hyo-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"They've been through a lot of hardship here."

"Giyooooooo!"

"And so, we..."

"Myaaaaaaaaa!"

"You're being noisy, Sister Coggie!"

Gapis!

Coggie fell and went completely silent. She had taken a full-force insect pitch right to the back of her head.

Capturing that in the corner of her vision, Lina twitched slightly.

Though the size was different, that form... she felt like she had been blasting attack spells at it with all her might just a little while ago...

".....It doesn't work, not on the subordinates."

The undeniable fact remained that no matter what we did, we couldn't harm these servants in front of Voim. We couldn't neutralize them, let alone defeat them. No matter how many we handled, there would be no end to it.

I decided to ignore that subtle reaction for now.

Bonnie, of course, didn't even notice.

"And so, I am working without regard for my own safety to save those children. Master Orphen, wouldn't it be good to take a note of this?"

"No... it's fine. I don't really understand the situation anyway."

In the end—

Whether I heard the story or not, it didn't change the situation. I had known that from the start.

At any rate, the battle was deepening into chaos in many ways.

Amidst the melee—

I suddenly felt something touch my back. I didn't feel any bloodlust, so I didn't react, but I cast a quick glance behind me and saw a chestnut-haired head. It was the small girl wrapped in a black cape. Lina.

Taking a short breath, I groaned. In a low voice that only she could hear:

"Is there any way to break through this encirclement?"

I asked her. Not everyone was bunched together, but from the perspective of the entire hall, we were surrounded by Voim's subordinates lined up along the perimeter. The problem was that the master, Voim, was at the top of the stairs beyond them. Furthermore, several same-faced men were standing by near Voim. If we couldn't break through the encirclement in an instant and capture him in another, Voim might just mass-produce more servants.

If she could do it, that would be fine, but...

Lina seemed to shake her head lightly.

".....That's a bit difficult. If it's just making a path and giving a push, I can manage somehow."

A path.

I groaned as I thought for a moment. I estimated the distance—and decided it wasn't impossible.

".....If a path opens for even a second, that's enough."

"You can do it!? On your end!?"

I gave a faint, bitter smile and told her honestly:

"My plans have a history of never working out."

But—

"But strangely enough, at times like this, they do."

"Roger that."

As far as I could see over my shoulder, Lina wore a fearless smile. I could take that to mean she trusted me. She continued, keeping her voice down.

"I'll make a path when I give the signal. I'll give you a push with 'Wind' while I'm at it."

She must have meant the wind from earlier.

I nodded to show my understanding and touched my emblem pendant to steady my mind. Everything depended on my concentration—

I felt Lina move away from my back. She called out to the other girl, Amelia.

"Circle around and aim for that pathetic old guy. Draw away as many of the servants as you can."

"Make a path when I give the signal."

Then, quickly, to Gourry:

The action was swift.

"Right!"

The blonde swordsman responded immediately and started running. He circled to the side and wedged himself between the servants. His gaze was fixed on Voim on the landing. Indeed, looking at his movements, it seemed as if he could slip right through—but there were too many enemies. As they began to move toward Gourry, the swordsman's form was easily lost within that wall of people. Still, the fact that he hadn't been captured was unbelievable.

But because of the enemies' movement, a thin spot had opened up. Lina and Amelia began their incantations at the same time.

And then, simultaneously—

"Fireball!"

With the blast pressure, several servants were blown away, and a complete gap opened up there. Lina signaled me with her eyes.

"Sha!"

I started running. Squeezing out every bit of stored explosive power, I plunged into the gap where the heat of the Fireball was swirling.

From behind, I heard Lina's voice as if it were chasing after me.

"Diem Wing!"

"Kuoh!"

The strong wind scattered the aftereffects of the flames and gave my back an extra

push.

That alone gained me several meters, but—

The subordinates who had been blown away were already getting up. They were about to swarm toward me. No matter what I did, I wouldn't make it before the stairs I saw were blocked by a wall of people. Not at my current speed.

However.

I sighted the gap in the enemy encirclement and wove a precise structure.

"I dance—The Pavilion of Heaven!"

Pseudo-spatial displacement. My vision vanished, and a moment later, a different sight opened up before me.

Having jumped the remaining distance in an instant, I was already outside the encirclement. Right in front of me were the stairs with Voim standing far above.

"He went!"

Lina's cry of certain victory. Hearing it, I lunged forward again with all my might—to dash up the stairs in one go. Looking down at me, Voim's face was frozen in shock.

(Alright—)

My internal organs were pounding, and my blood vessels seemed to be dilating and contracting violently. Every biological function was pulsating intensely. This wasn't because of the excitement of victory, though. My body was screaming because I had used a high-level magic. The limit might be near, but as long as I captured Voim, this entire farce would end.

I didn't need to hold back.

"Daaaaaaah!"

Letting out a roar, I kicked off the long staircase. Voim, flustered as expected, threw up his arms.

"If you're coming, then so be it—!"

Around him were several subordinates. They began to move nimbly to block my path.

Once again, the timing wasn't going to work.

"I dance—The Pavilion of Heaven!"

Completing a second high-level magic in a row, I plunged again into that imaginary zero-distance, imaginary light-speed.

(It’s over!)

At this distance, I should emerge from the teleportation in a position where I could touch Voim. As long as I could touch him, I should be able to capture any opponent with a human shape.

Deceleration. I couldn't perceive it, but regardless, I returned to normal space. All distance had vanished. Slipping past the subordinates, Voim was right in front of me. The god's face was twisted in terror.

But for some reason, even further in front of him was Keith, sitting in a formal kneeling position and slurping tea.

[.....]

I was speechless, but despite being at a loss for words, a scream burst out of me.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

If we had collided during the acceleration, neither of us would likely have returned to reality—we would have taken the full impact upon our physical bodies and shattered into dust. Normally, the air resistance alone would have been enough to strip away every ounce of my physical strength. Considering that, I suppose I could call it lucky that the crash happened after the deceleration.

Not that I intended to submit to such logic.

While every imaginable curse flashed through my mind, I didn't have the time to voice them. I tripped over Keith and took a spectacular tumble. The world spun, and I was blinded by light amidst the impact. From right beside me, I heard Keith—who had somehow managed to keep his teacup upright without spilling a drop—speak to me with a dead-serious face.

"Don't you think fighting so intensely makes one thirsty?"

"YOU PIECE OF—!?"

Even as I bellowed at him, there was no escaping the fact that we were both already being pinned down by Voim’s subordinates.

"Damn it...!"

Looking down from the landing, it seemed Gourry was also reaching his limit. I could see Lina and Amelia frozen in place with their eyes like dots, still holding their victory poses. I had won the bet, but I was betrayed by the victory. Like a painting with such a title, the situation had plummeted into total despair in an instant.

However, a voice rang out.

"Was it an army?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A ridiculously shrill, high-pitched laugh. That staccato laughter pierced through the gravity of the situation and echoed throughout the hall. Naga—clad in that staggering outfit (though I knew "clad" wasn't quite the right word)—shook her body with laughter as she pointed a finger at the subordinate she had been facing off against.

"Ho-ho-ho... Isn't it overwhelming? My army."

"Hah! We won!"

At that declaration, a flash of tension seemed to cross the faces of Voim's subordinates, who until now had never shown a hint of agitation. Triumphantly, she continued.

"That paper of yours—isn't it starting to dry already!?"

"Lina! Help me out over here!"

"Got it! Gourry, find a way to break out!"

"Find a way!? How!?"

It was a mess. Instructions and screams crossed paths, completely ignoring Naga.

I saw Bonnie casually move behind Lina, leaving behind a blood-soaked Constance who lay on the floor. Bonnie was aimlessly staring up at the chandelier on the ceiling, perhaps counting the number of ornaments on it.

Regardless—in a position where I was completely immobilized, there was nothing to stop Voim from muttering arrogantly. Unless I could catch my breath, it didn't look like I could use magic. I could do nothing but listen to the "god's" ramblings while gnashing my teeth.

"It’s fine!"

Voim shouted back in response to a minor point of contention.

In truth, as he said, we were reaching the limit. In a split second of distraction, Lina and Amelia, who had been holding their own until then, were seized by the subordinates.

"Crap...!"

"Lina!"

Gourry howled at Lina's scream—but it didn't change a thing. Now that our only chance at victory had been crushed, this was nothing more than a losing battle. A futile, time-wasting resistance.

"It seems this is the end... wouldn't you agree?"

His voice rang out almost simultaneously with a series of dull, wet thuds from downstairs, like fruit being smashed to pieces.

A sound that stuck in the ear—that was my first impression.

The man calling himself God muttered and blinked his incongruously long eyelashes. He turned his gaze toward the sound.

[.....]

However, we were blocked by the wall of servants and couldn't see anything.

"Ugh..."

Constance, covered in blood, seemed to regain consciousness and sat up—then, after looking over the state of the battle, she tapped her own wounds a few times and

went back to playing dead. Or perhaps she forced herself to faint again. That might have been the wisest course of action.

"Dammit!"

I couldn't do anything but curse. I was desperate to pull my arm out from where it was sandwiched between the weight of the enemy and the floor as I glared at Voim. He wore a smile full of irony and spoke with grand composure.

From outside the circle!

Squish, crack, thud...

Crunch. Snap. Slop.

Some kind of gruesome noises were drawing closer.

The density of the men surrounding us had thinned. Only in the corner where the sound was approaching.

Thump, thump!

The subordinate holding the wet paper—and Naga along with him—were sent flying. The source of the noise finally revealed herself: a petite woman in her mid-twenties.

In the silence that followed for a heartbeat, Keith’s mutter echoed clearly.

"Oho, Lady Dorothy."

"Uuugh?"

"Dor-theeeee!?"

I let out a scream, as did Coggie and Bonnie, before falling silent in shock.

"...Who?"

"...I don't know..."

Amelia muttered an answer to Lina’s aimless question.

Ignoring everyone around her, Dorothy stood there with a cigarette in her mouth, dangling a chair in one hand. Like the eye of a storm.

"...Too many."

She spat the words out sullenly.

[.....]

For some reason, the man calling himself God felt like those words were directed at him, and he let out a hollow sound.

"They've decreased, though."

Speaking one-sidedly, Dorothy began to slowly climb the stairs.

Of course, he was surrounded by many faithful servants. Against them, even a violent, rude black sorcerer from another world or a female mage would be no match.

And yet, why? Why did even those subordinates feel so incredibly unreliable?

"Um... er... excuse me!"

I felt a premonition that if I didn't say something, things would go beyond the point of no return, but no words came to mind. Dorothy remained expressionless, simply climbing the stairs. Carrying the chair.

".....It was a hassle."

"Um, what was...?"

Without realizing it, I had switched entirely to polite speech.

"Getting this far."

The answer was concise.

The subordinates who had been holding Keith and me scattered. They realized it. Even they, devoid of emotion or instinct, understood through raw intuition.

The opponent coming toward them now was a far greater threat than anyone they had faced so far.

I was free—but I no longer had the physical or mental energy to move. No. Not in any sense of the word.

Several servants near her lunged at Dorothy all at once!

It took exactly three seconds for them to be silenced!

Stepping over their easily defeated bodies, Dorothy continued up the stairs, her brow slightly furrowed as if the walking was a bit difficult.

"A-aah... aah... auh."

At this unbelievable sight, the man playing God sat down hard on his backside, his jaw hanging open.

"Why!? For what cause or reason!?"

A scream of confusion burst from his mouth.

"My... the things I created... there's no way you should be able to, to defy—"

For a split second, Dorothy stopped, raised the chair, and said:

"This."

"...Excuse me?"

He asked back with a gape-mouthed voice.

"...Furniture that was in this building."

She clearly had no intention of acknowledging this place as a castle.

"I see."

"When I hit them with this, they were brittle. That's all."

The explanation was blunt and easy to understand. With the conversation apparently over, she resumed her walk.

Not knowing what to do, the self-proclaimed god just sat there, trembling with a cramped smile on his face.

His brain only started functioning again when Dorothy stood towering over him like a guardian statue.

He thought of a clever and meticulous excuse, his expression brightening.

"Um—"

Thud.

The chair in Dorothy’s hand slammed into his face.

The god of this world lost consciousness.

The battlefield froze at the sheer absurdity of the development. But into that gap, someone intervened.

Bam!

The subordinate who had been holding Amelia was suddenly shoved aside. Standing there was—

"Mr. Zelgadis!"

Amelia’s voice rang out.

Yes. Standing there was the man of strange appearance—Zelgadis, who had drawn close under the cover of the chaos caused by Dorothy’s appearance.

"Amelia."

With his left hand, Zelgadis gently took Amelia’s right hand—and tenderly pressed a stone the size of a baby’s head into it.

"I thought so, too. It wasn't my style, so I left it to you—"

He looked at Amelia.

"It seems I made the right choice."

"Are you a demon? Honestly."

Lina muttered in exasperation.

A shadow loomed over the muttering Lina! One of the subordinates brandished a corn cob high in the air.

"Fight with your soul of justice imbued in this!"

"Yes!"

Amelia answered energetically. She looked around, grabbed the man who had been holding Lina, gave him a taste of the stone, knocked him flat, and then, with an incredibly vivid expression, started clobbering every servant within reach.

"...What is that?"

Lina, having been released, stood up and questioned Zelgadis. Her gaze was fixed on the rampaging Amelia.

"Just a stone from around here. Though it's harder than anything else."

".....But that... looks more like a bloodthirsty rioter than... justice..."

"You think so too?"

Zelgadis agreed wholeheartedly.

But before it could be swung down, Lina's hand reached into her pocket! The two shadows crossed.

Slap!

With an exceptionally cheerful sound, the man was the one who jerked back and collapsed. Standing there, Lina held a slipper that did *not* shine brilliantly!

".....Huh..... So that's all it took..."

A hollow laugh mixed with self-mockery.

[.....]

In response to Zelgadis's question, Lina kept the same smile.

"I thought... this might happen... so I couldn't help it, but anyway, I swiped this slipper—"

".....You swiped it 'anyway'...?"

Zelgadis offered a quiet retort.

The battle was already decided. The men were no longer immortal or invincible, and they had lost their center of command.

The chair, the stone, the slipper. Or a vase. An ornament.

Every time one of them whistled through the air, the servants created by the man calling himself God fell, one by one.

"What a joke. An opponent immune to matter disintegration and thermal shockwaves... and it comes to this."

Leaning against the stair railing, watching the commotion below, I muttered to myself in a tired voice.

"I don't accept this!"

Voim, who had been hauled up, wailed while shaking his head left and right. He shook it so violently that even his hairstyle subtly changed, and then—

Lina reached out and grabbed his head, forcing it back into place. A strange cracking sound came from her hands, but ignoring that, she asked him back. With a smile. No, a "grinned" smile, with a vein throbbing on her forehead.

"Hah?"

"What about it?"

"Aaaaaah!? The terror filled wonderland of being grabbed by some kind of ferocious animal!?"

A delirious Voim raved. Lina’s smile didn't waver for a second.

"Look at the situation very carefully, okay? Do you really think your 'accepting' or 'not accepting' things is going to change anything?"

Vessels were popping up all over her face now, not just her forehead, yet she kept the smile pinned on.

Voim screamed.

"But I don't accept it! This is unreasonable! Absurd! Forced! Impossible!"

Indeed—

Though there was nowhere to run, Voim made a pathetically visible effort to back away. I stepped in front of Lina, lightly pressing her hand down.

"Don't be violent."

"Violence?"

Lina spoke up, and I nodded, adding:

"You have to stop at around 90% dead. If you accidentally kill him, it'll be a bit of a problem for us."

"90%...?"

"One more step!"

Lina made a troubled face. "Well, fine. Just for today."

"I feel like the only thing above that is 100%..."

"Um... if I die today, there is no tomorrow. Also, I'd appreciate it if you didn't decide a god's life with such a casual tone..."

I thought I heard Voim muttering something like that.

Lina leaned her face so close to the "god" that their noses almost touched. Something distinctly ominous flickered in Voim's eyes. I suspected it was what people call the shadow of death.

Lina spoke slowly, putting on her smile again.

"Well, anyway. The task of returning us to our original world—as long as you're still breathing at the time, it'll be fine, right?"

"I-I'd like to say it can't be done unless I'm in perfect health, hale and hearty, unbound, un-scorched, and preferably after a relaxing bath, spending some ennui-filled time in a breeze while sipping lukewarm tea... or so I'd like to say."

"You'd 'like to say'... so that means 90% is okay. Simply put."

"Uugh!? No, you're wrong! If it's not like that, the possibility of it being done perfectly

is absolutely, definitively non-existent! Truly!"

To Voim, who was protesting violently with vertical shakes added to his previous horizontal ones—

I let out a deep sigh. In a grave tone, I muttered:

"Unfortunately, it looks like only one of those things is going to happen."

"Pardon?"

Thinking he had found some salvation, Voim turned toward me. I paused for a moment before finishing.

"The lukewarm part."

"No, um... I'd at least like you to tell me *what* is going to be lukewarm..."

"Wait, Orphen."

Suddenly, Lina spoke up. Her large eyes were shining as if she had just come up with a breakthrough.

"Let's do this. First, 90%. Then, a healing spell. Then, another 90%. If we repeat that, both our opinions will be satisfied."

Voim screamed.

"A-aah!? Entropy increases, so I point out that I must eventually die!"

".....Entro...? I don't really get it, but I'll take that as a 'yes' then!"

"Augh! I, of all people, am in a P-I-N-C-H!"

"It was a short acquaintance. Looks like it'll be short from here on out, too."

I offered my sympathy in a withered mood. Lina smiled even more brightly.

"Did you know? There's a weak fire spell called Burst Rondo... it really hurts when it pops inside your mouth."

"Uheeeee—"

After echoing an especially long scream.

A sudden silence.

Then, his shoulders began to tremble. What escaped his mouth was not a sob, but a laugh.

"......Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho..."

"......What!?"

"...Oh. Did he snap?"

Ignoring the muttering Orphen and Lina, the voice of the man who wished to be a god continued.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-fu."

"It changed just a little bit."

"You lot... for mere samples. You really have made a fool of me."

Ignoring my retort, he spoke.

Lina and I frowned slightly and looked around. There were no longer any subordinates moving.

In fact, every single one of them had vanished without a trace.

I suppose once a piece is destined to lose, it’s no longer needed.

"Who—"

"Have you forgotten the reason I summoned you to this world? And have you forgotten exactly who I am!?"

"Save the boring stories for later. What are you thinking!?"

Lina spat the words out. Truly, this was not an opponent worth wasting time on by exchanging actual conversation.

"Heh—I am the absolute being. Of this world, that is."

The scorched creature lifted its head, its eyes flashing with a sharp glint.

"To be perfectly honest, I had nearly forgotten myself!"

".....Yeah, not exactly something to be proud of..."

I muttered, exasperated beyond belief.

"It would have been better if you'd kept forgetting forever."

Lina jumped onto my remark.

"Hmph. I shall not forget again. Never again. Now that things have come to this, you lot are ultimately unfit for my world. And for unfit products, no mercy is required."

"Listen. You're in no position to be talking so big—"

"In the first place!"

Silencing Lina with a thunderous roar, the man continued.

"I summoned you to be samples for my world! And I have already obtained the ultimate sample!"

Half-maddened with rage and half-intoxicated by his own words, he spoke with bloodshot eyes.

—The Wrath of God—

Likely, he was the only one who had such a phrase flash through his mind.

".....The ultimate.....?"

Reacting to that single word, Lina tentatively cast a glance toward Naga.

The ultimate sample.

Wasn't that the phrase the pathetic man calling himself God used to describe Keith and Naga?

"Therefore!"

And 'God' spoke out regardless.

"Its completion is already achieved! What is the ultimate inhabitant? Noble, powerful, overflowing with intellect, beautiful, growing, never aging, and..... of course, obedient to me....."

"......Hey....."

I, too, felt a strange premonition and let out an uneasy murmur.

"Even if you regret it, it is too late!"

He screamed.

"You cannot resist!"

In a frenzy so intense he might have vomited blood.

"The truly ultimate inhabitant! It shall be the pinnacle of art created by God—"

K-crack!

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashed.

The one who screamed was likely Bonnie.

Lina and the others readied themselves, as did I. I didn't know what was about to happen. Lina muttered a spell under her breath, Gourry and Zelgadis readied their swords, and Amelia gripped the stone in her hand.

And then.

The one calling himself God wore an expression of serenity. A smile of pure bliss.

And he announced.

Loudly. Proudly.

".....Come forth..... Ultimate Inhabitant. KEEGA!"

Basha-bishy-shaan!

The lingering echo of thunder. A rumbling.

Several bolts of lightning flashed, dyeing his pale face an even ghostlier white.

No. This was—

Go-go-go-go-gogogogo...

With a low sound, the floor, the walls—

".....It’s collapsing!?"

The ceiling began to shake.

Yes. My voice mingled with the groaning of the building.

The castle that was never supposed to rot was now beginning to crumble.

Because the creator willed it so.

"K... Keega...!?"

Amidst the intensifying tremors, mine and Lina's gazes met.

"I think we're imagining the same thing..."

Was it because of the shaking? Or some other reason? My voice was trembling.

Lina lost both her words and her color at the same time.

"Be afraid! My guests!"

The voice of the mock-God echoed through the roar.

"Nay—those who have become foolish prisoners who can never return!"

The floor. The walls. The ceiling.

Everything met the moment of total collapse at once.

The sound, surpassing a mere roar, turned into a vibration of the atmosphere itself.

To somehow stop the collapse, Lina began chanting a spell, while simultaneously delivering a lethal heel drop to the mock-God who was still laughing like an idiot!

"Ho-aaaah-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho—boge."

That side fell silent for a moment, but the collapse of the castle, once started, did

not stop.

Coggie and Bonnie made a senseless fuss, Dorothy looked unusually unbothered, and Keith quietly sipped his tea.

"I release—"

Amidst the flood of confusion and vibration, I raised my voice. Holding both hands toward the ceiling, I released magic along with my voice to blow away the falling debris.

"Blade of Light!"

The resulting thermal shockwave repelled the large rock masses that had abandoned their invincibility, but it wasn't enough to blow away the ceiling itself.

Zelgadis and Amelia were creating barriers with wind spells to repel small fragments, but if the whole ceiling came down, even that wouldn't hold.

Lina's spell was completed.

"Chaos Words!"

The language of chaos crossed the walls of the world, guiding a power not of this earth.

Beside her, I concentrated my awareness again, weaving together the structure of an even larger spell.

And then.

"I break—"

"Dragon—"

The two spells—

"Primordial Silence!"

"Slave!"

Became one massive flash of light.

The sky fell—after that.

A heavy, black sky. Crushed by that massive sky, I was quietly dying. Or at least, I was tasting that sensation. I let out a groan, gasping at the pain spreading through my entire body. From tiny stings to a deep, dull ache. Amidst the various pains, I felt my drowsy consciousness clearing up piece by piece. Not like waking from sleep, but a more forced paralysis of the body. For a while, I wandered through that dim void, seeking an even bleaker exit.

If I stayed calm, I could figure it out immediately...

(.....*Did I take a hit to the back of the head? It's not a deep wound..... I'll be able to move soon.....*)

The ceiling had collapsed; I'd managed to repel most of it, but since I couldn't destroy it, preventing it completely had been impossible from the start. A fragment must have hit me. Since it was the back of my head, perhaps another fragment had hit a different part first, and then hit me again as I was falling. Or maybe it fell on me after I was down.

Regardless, I slowly lifted my head. My fingers twitched. Pressing both hands against the floor, I peeled my body up all at once, and only then could I finally open my eyes.

The scenery had transformed completely.

Rather, the indoors had turned into the outdoors. The castle seemed to have collapsed entirely. Its remains were nothing but piles of rubble heaped like mountains. The interior, which had been so luxuriously decorated, was crushed under debris ranging from massive chunks to pebbles, looking like internal organs spilling out of a corpse. Mist. A thick mist hung in the air, and the sky was dark and stagnant.

I didn't know how much time had passed since we entered the castle. Streetlights dotted the town, flickering. No, they weren't even strong enough to be called 'lighting.' They barely managed to make the surroundings stand out.

I turned around at a sound, and just as I expected, a chestnut-haired head was crawling out from the rubble. A bandana and a black cloak. Shoulder guards.

"....."

"I guess some pebbles hit you after all."

Lina was holding her head, groaning.

For the time being, I grabbed onto some nearby rubble and stood up. Pushing aside fragments of walls or ceilings that buried me up to my shins, I spoke.

".....Looks like we survived, somehow."

With a *clunk*, the rubble that had been hiding Lina's entire body fell over. Voim, still tied up, was sitting in a formal kneeling position with his eyes rolled back. Lina's heel was still resting on his head. The god-like thing seemed to be completely unconscious.

Once we started moving, the rest happened quickly.

"Is everyone alright!?"

Amelia’s voice echoed as she called out, stepping over Naga who was buried in rocks.

"Master Orphen, are you injured!?"

This was Bonnie, stepping over Constance.

Lina looked at the buried Naga and stated flatly.

"Looks like everyone's fine."

"There seems to be no problem."

The blood-soaked Constance didn't seem to have much consciousness left, but she was already sluggishly reviving from under Bonnie's feet.

Then, I heard someone let out a soft sigh. Turning my head, I saw Keith shaking his head as if relieved.

"That the young ladies are safe... this Keith feels his life was worth risking."

"I..."

"My, my, how grateful I am. For holding an umbrella for us."

Dorothy was groaning with half-closed eyes. Underneath the pink parasol held by the perverted butler.

".....So? What on earth was that? That shaking just now."

The question wasn't directed at anyone in particular, but the one who asked it was the man with skin like rock who had appeared with Dorothy earlier. It was a hard name to remember, but I managed to recall it. Zelgadis.

"Allow me to answer! Mr. Rock!"

Without being intimidated at all by the man who was barely human, Keith raised his hand. Waving his white-gloved hand vigorously, he continued.

"Prepare to be amazed—likely, the castle simply fell down!"

Whether being called 'Rock' bothered him or he just didn't want to deal with it, the one named Zelgadis decided to ignore him.

I let out a sigh—feeling an indescribable sense of weariness, I answered in his place.

"This is apparently a world where everything goes exactly as this guy wants."

I pointed at Voim, who still had Lina's heel on his head.

"A final resistance... or so I'd like to think."

The moment I said it, I understood the reason for my dark mood. The final words Voim had uttered. I felt an uncontrollably bad premonition. I felt like I'd been feeling it non-stop ever since we were thrown into this world.

Glancing over, I saw the blonde swordsman staring blankly at the sky. It was clouded with mist, so he likely couldn't see anything, but—

"......Hey..... what is that....."

He was pointing vaguely at the sky.

"Hmm? What?"

Lina also followed his gaze and froze. She had been dusting off her clothes, but she stopped moving as she looked up, and so did I.

"....."

A gloomy, dark sky. Part of it was the mist, but within it, there existed an even denser shadow. Like a massive..... distorted giant.

Sound vanished. Everyone, who until then had been muttering something even if only to themselves, lost their words and stood agape.

The shadow of the giant simply towered silently in the sky, as if looking down upon us.

A silhouette far too square to be called 'rugged.' I could almost feel a sense of charm from it, yet it was a bizarre shape devoid of any organic feeling. It wasn't that I could see it clearly, but while it was humanoid, I felt absolutely no intent to make it look like a human.

And then, suddenly.

"BE AFRAID!"

With a shout, Voim stood up vigorously while still having Lina's heel on his head—

"Whoa-whoa-whoa!"

Lina nearly lost her balance and hurriedly pulled her heel away.

Voim didn't care at all; he whipped his body around, climbed over the rubble, and trudged away. Standing tall in a spot where the rubble was piled a bit higher, he shouted once more.

"Be afraid, you fools! It is the hour of your destruction!"

"That line again?"

Zelgadis groaned coldly. His emotionless eyes were directed at Voim like a winter moon. His hand rested lightly on the hilt of his sword.

Whether he noticed it or not—or perhaps because he didn't care—Voim shot back.

"It’s fine! Good things are good no matter how many times you hear them!"

I suppose you could call him surprisingly conscientious. As Voim shook his body, the rope that had been binding 'God' snapped without any warning. He spread his free arms, raised them above his head, paused for a moment, and then spread them again—after showing off plenty of meaningless actions, he spoke.

"You lot likely do not know the meaning of true despair. For this is the first time you have faced Me."

Voim's voice was quite boastful.

But I wasn't listening; I was looking up at the massive shadow towering in the opposite direction from Voim. The shadow wasn't even trying to move, but by any estimation, it had a mass comparable to the castle we had been in until now.

When we entered the castle, there was no such thing. That meant it had either appeared suddenly or moved from somewhere else. If it had moved, it meant that a body this massive was capable of 'motion.'

Honestly, I couldn't imagine it. Just how much energy would that take? At least as far as I knew, no creature on earth could maintain such a massive body. No, that was just knowledge from my world...

Likely from that same unease, Zelgadis raised his voice irritably.

"I get it, so just get on with it. What is that thing?"

Voim didn't seem intimidated by the monstrous warrior.

"I told you! First, be afraid!"

Along with that voice, a sound like a groan... *uooo*... echoed. It seemed to have come from the massive shadow. The shadow hadn't shown any significant movement yet.

Even at a time like this, Lina responded lightly and fearlessly.

"Ah. Scary, scary. Yes, and then?"

"Hmph....."

Voim's voice, which lacked dignity but was heavy as always, thinned out the tension every single time. So did his theatrical, forty-five-degree smile. He placed his hand on his tilted chin, continuing in a dandy pose.

"The 'Ultimate' Inhabitant—I think I shall name it that."

Crack! Another bolt of lightning.

For now, there was no point in worrying about things I didn't understand. I whispered to Lina, gesturing toward the sky where thunder was rumbling.

"He's definitely staging this, isn't he?"

"Definitely."

Ignoring our voices, Voim raised his voice again.

"An inhabitant perfectly suited for my world, and more perfect than any other!"

Yet another flash of lightning. Because of that flash, it felt for a moment as if the giant’s silhouette became even denser.

"Ooh!"

While hearing Amelia let out a voice of burning excitement as if she were strangely impressed.

I frowned, feeling as though I'd glimpsed something strange within the flash. I couldn't tell exactly what it was...

I instinctively looked toward Keith and broke into a cold sweat at the sight of the butler brewing tea for Dorothy. The words leaked out naturally.

"No way..... surely not."

"What’s wrong?"

Lina, quick of hearing, asked back. I shook my head in a gesture of rubbing tired eyes.

"No... I just feel like I saw something that's going to leave a deep scar on my heart..."

"....."

Lina groaned, looking truly disgusted.

In the meantime, Voim raised his voice while striking exaggerated poses. Along with the storm, along with the thunder.

"Rage now, O thunder! Roar, O hellfire! Cry out, O storm! Here and now, on this night, the time for the birth of the Ultimate Inhabitant to awaken! KEEGA! COME FORTH!"

From the lower part of the giant—several streaks of light illuminated its massive body. Simultaneously, countless fireworks exploded in the misty sky. Burning in the light, the swirling void. What that brilliance manifested in the night was...

"....."

"......Is that it?"

I opened my eyes wide and held my breath.

"Aaaah! So cool!"

While Amelia and Gourry were making a fuss, everyone else was silent.

What appeared there was a massive monster that must have been thirty meters tall. A boxy torso with a head of the same scale mounted upon it. It had no neck.

The arms, attached at angles that surely couldn't function properly, had no fingers and were roughly constructed like a pair of tongs or pliers. Spikes on the shoulders. A horn on the forehead. On the top of the head... how should I put it...

- A single rod, like a flagpole, stood protruding from its body. At its tip was a red sphere.
- Cheap, glittering decorations were plastered across various parts of its frame. Its legs, much like its arms, lacked joints; they were simple cylinders that looked incapable of proper movement. Large screws protruded haphazardly, as if intentionally exposed. Its head was dominated by two round eyes that took up most of its surface area, and within them were two faces I felt I'd seen somewhere before.

In the left eye was Keith, wearing a flat, featureless smile.

In the right eye was Naga, grinning pointlessly.

A red logo with illegible characters glowed on its chest, but it was easy enough to imagine what it said:

"KEEGA"

The construction appeared shoddy to the extreme; the edges were already beginning to peel. If left alone, it would probably fall apart on its own before long.

The massive metallic monster shifted slightly, breaking the silence as it let out a laughing cry.

"Ugh, so annoying!"

Lina immediately shrieked back in a voice bordering on a scream.

While everyone else stood stunned, Voim's shouting was reaching a fever pitch.

"Heh heh heh... Beautiful, is it not? It is so beautiful! Overwhelmed by such menace and beauty, you shall be struck with awe and rendered speechless!"

He spoke triumphantly, even managing to straighten his scorched mustache by hand.

"The two ultimate samples I selected, synthesized and combined... Their performance blended without waste! A 'Greatest Art' that possesses the characteristics of both, synergizing and amplifying them! The Ultimate Inhabitant, Keega! Two minutes for the concept, three minutes for the construction!"

Suddenly, I saw Lina spin around. She turned back toward Voim and retreated a bit—likely to gain enough distance for a running start—then, after a few rhythmic steps, she broke into a jog.

"There's no point to this!"

WHAM!

She jumped with all her might and drove her fist into Voim’s face as he stood atop a high pile of rubble. He tumbled from his perch, helpless, but immediately boinged back to his original position and screamed.

"Don't just punch me out of nowhere! Listen, the Ultimate Inhabitant Keega has various functions... a multitude of terrifying abilities inspired by the samples!"

Intending to build anticipation, he paused for a beat and called out to Keega in a shrill, loud voice.

"Keega Wing!"

Simultaneously, with a metallic clang, two pointed wings sprang out from Keega’s back to the left and right.

"Which one is it?! Which one of them has wings?!"

I let out a long shout of exasperation as I glared at Voim. Smoothing his stiff mustache with his fingers, Voim seemed to have completely regained his momentum. He spoke in a tone brimming with confidence.

"Furthermore: Keega Fireeeee!"

This time, from the center of the small horn-like object on Keega's forehead, a crimson beam was fired toward the night sky. I didn't know if it actually possessed destructive power, but a bizarre, indescribable sound—*byo-byo-byo*—echoed through the air.

"Why couldn't you leave the original forms alone?!"

I let out a sigh, no longer having the energy to make a fuss.

"Which one was it?"

"Actually, back in the day, I had a part-time job..."

I heard Keith answer with a dead-serious face.

Voim looked over at us curiously—or rather, he put his finger to his mouth, clearly unsatisfied with our reaction.

"Well, it can't fly, though. It's too heavy."

"Hmph. For some reason, the cheers are a bit lacking... Well then, how about this? Keega On Stage!"

The lights illuminating Keega from below suddenly changed color. A myriad of primary colors, countless lights. Perhaps it would have been a beautiful sight if the object being illuminated was actually worth looking at. In the end, it only served to make the garish giant look even more gaudy. Only Voim wore a look of total satisfaction.

"Heh. As the Ultimate Inhabitant, Keega is naturally lit up. You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Not really."

Everyone stated flatly at the same time. However, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Amelia looking slightly envious.

"W-What!?"

Showing the first sign of actual agitation, Voim staggered.

"It lacks flashiness... is that it! So that's how it is!"

"Um..."

"Ho ho ho. It seems you lot have underestimated me a little. This sort of thing is, after all, nothing more than a farce."

He raised his arm and swung it down as if giving a grand command.

"The true value of Keega—witness it well!"

BOOM!

Behind Keega, an explosion occurred, sending up smoke that looked like colored lime. Exactly five colors. Voim nodded as he looked up at it.

"Umu. I knew this would be flashier."

"No, I mean..."

"W-What!? I-Is it CG after all? Are the kids these days no good without CG?"

"I don't even know what that is."

I groaned with half-closed eyes.

I didn't quite understand, but it seemed Voim was going through his own set of struggles as he held his head, seemingly lost in thought. Not that our reaction was going to change because of that.

"I'll be Pink!"

"Eh!?"

Suddenly, Amelia dropped her rucksack and began rummaging through it. She pulled out several brightly colored outfits and said with a smile—

"I don't know what's going on, but don't try to compete with him!"

"Stop it! Fireball!"

Lina hurled a ball of fire, incinerating the clothes Amelia had just taken out. They turned to ash in an instant.

"How cruel! And there was even a 'Black' one! Ahh!"

Amelia let out a tearful cry and turned a pleading gaze—toward me.

"What are you even talking about!?"

I shouted for the time being.

Constance, who seemed to have recovered enough to finally walk, came wobbling over. Looking panicked, she asked:

"M-More importantly, what are we going to do about that big thing!"

Beside her, Bonnie raised her voice as well. However, she directed a sharp gaze at Amelia.

"What are you saying? How could Master Orphen be 'Black'?! Master Orphen is the color of an angel!"

"I have no idea what any of you are talking about."

Amidst the noise, Dorothy muttered quietly.

"Things seem to be heating up over there—"

Voim muttered, sounding a bit lonely. But he quickly regained his composure and stood haughtily once more.

"The fate of you all ends here! Remember that your powers will not work against my creation. That said, will you challenge the massive body of Keega with mere stones? Hmm? Unless I give my permission, your spells are powerless—"

He cut off mid-sentence.

Perhaps he had noticed the gaze coming from this side.

Lina was staring him down with her eyelids half-closed. Her murmur sounded like the growl of a predator.

".....Ho. So, unless we have permission, right...?"

I followed up in a low voice.

"If we have permission... so it’s just a puppet, in other words."

"Pardon?"

Whether he truly didn't understand or he understood all too well, Voim asked back in a twitchy voice. Without answering, we all began to edge closer to him in silence.

I cracked my knuckles with force. Voim backed away as if being pushed.

".....U-Um..."

Voim pointed past our heads toward Keega and issued a warning.

"Y-You lot! If you lay a hand on me, you'll face the wrath of Keega! Keega is my ultimate ideal! The foundation of this world is built upon Keega!"

"What are you going to do, fill the world with things like that!?"

I shouted. I also heard Lina state matter-of-factly:

"I'm starting to feel a little like burying you before the world gets buried by that thing."

Voim, however, shook his head like a throwing a tantrum.

"Hmph. You 'unfit products' just don't get it. I shall always shine brilliantly at the peak of this world."

"SHUT UP AND TAKE THIS! STRIKE!"

Lina ran up the rubble again and launched a flying kick at Voim.

"I don't care about anything else, just give us permission to destroy it!"

Voim fell over, his face visibly caved in by her toe. He tried to slip through her hands as she mercilessly attempted to pin him down, and the god-like creature cried out violently.

"K-Kuuuu! Never! I absolutely refuse!" he shouted while launching a counterattack of sorts.

Simultaneously—*Clap!*—he struck his hands together right in front of Lina’s eyes. Then, with unbelievable dexterity, he seized a split-second opening and fled like a startled rabbit.

His fleeing speed was tremendous. Using a mysterious running style where you couldn't tell if he was sprinting or rolling, he put distance between us in an instant.

By then, Lina had already turned back toward us.

"Hmph! If you're going to rely on me that much, I guess I have no choice!"

"You were alive?"

Zelgadis muttered with extreme coldness. Naga seemingly didn't hear him; she pointed her index finger toward Keega.

"Hoh! It’s an elegant design, almost a shame to destroy... but I shall show no mercy!"

By that time, Voim was quite far away. He was running with reasonable haste, but he wasn't gaining any ground.

Lina cupped her hands like a megaphone and shouted:

"Ah—you don't have to destroy it! You just go give that guy some life counseling!"

"Hoh! Understood!"

Naga dashed straight toward Keega! In front of the advancing massive body, she suddenly plopped down into a formal kneeling position, putting Lina’s advice into practice!

Namely:

Life Counseling, start!

"Hoh. Don't you think it’s a problem how expensive cabbage has been lately?"

Squish.

A vivid sound mingled with the heavy footsteps of Keega.

"Ah. She got stepped on."

"....."

Gourry and Zelgadis muttered in troubled tones.

Gourry looked over at Zelgadis.

"But what do we do? I’m pretty sure attacks don't work on it."

"Even so..... if we don't at least slow it down, who knows what she'll say to us later."

"That’s right! Courage, friendship, and unity.....!"

Hearing their words, Amelia clenched her fists tight! Ignoring her, Zelgadis fired a spell at Keega’s feet!

"Freeze Brid!"

Keega continued its march, ignoring the block of ice that had frozen around its feet.

"Looks like it doesn't work~"

"Shouldn't we just run?"

Dorothy spoke in the tone of a completely detached commentator, while Coggie panicked in contrast.

Zelgadis’s eyebrow twitched ever so slightly at Dorothy’s words—but ignoring her, he looked at Amelia and Gourry.

".....Amelia, we'll go at the same time."

"Yes!"

"Master Gourry. The sword."

"Hmm? Oh!"

Sensing the intent, Gourry tossed the Sword of Light—which was currently just a hilt—to Zelgadis.

Zelgadis and Amelia.

Both their hands gripped the hilt, and their voices joined in a spell chant.

And then—

"Demona Crystal!"

The power born from their harmonized voices converged into the light sword, was amplified, and burst forth as a blue flash!

The light shattered against Keega’s surface, and a split second later, it covered the massive body in thick ice!

“There,” Dorothy’s voice rang out!

".....Isn't it not working?"

She was perfectly, utterly calm.

The correct answer was Dorothy’s opinion.

Keega stopped moving for a brief moment, but—

Cr-crack. Snap, crackle.

Tiny crushing sounds. And finally.

K-BOOM!

With a grand noise, it easily burst apart.

"She’s right."

Gourry was somehow impressed.

".....If you're going to complain, show me you can do something."

To Zelgadis, who spoke in a voice suppressing his emotions, Dorothy let out a sigh.

"Even if you say that..."

She picked up a stone from beneath her feet and said in a disinterested tone:

"I mean, this kind of exercise is a bit much for being three months pregnant."

"Liar!"

Coggie screamed out reflexively—or rather, let out a shriek.

"Wait... Wait a minute!"

Even Zelgadis panicked at that.

"Three months? That’s not good!"

"Is it?"

Only the person herself remained composed.

"This is really..... maybe we should run."

Finally, even Amelia spoke an uncharacteristically defeatist opinion.

Amidst all this.

"Ha!? That’s it!"

The one who spoke up was Bonnie.

Whatever she had thought of, she began rummaging through the nearby rubble, and eventually excavated that tiny, limp insect from before.

Holding it up with both hands, she said:

"We just need to ask this little one's friends for help! The oppressed masses joining forces, using the power of unity to take down a giant foe!"

She negotiated with the insect for a while with mysterious gestures, then lifted her head solemnly.

"It said no."

"That's why I'm saying we should run."

Coggie repeated patiently.

In this case, her opinion might have been the most correct one.

Ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ha

Meanwhile, Keega continued its advance, letting out its cry—or perhaps its laughter.

That voice was then overwhelmed.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Two laughs echoed through the ruins!

"Oh!"

The voices of the group contained far more unease than expectation.

As for whose laughter it was, of course, it went without saying. Coggie and Zelgadis looked around and spoke one after another.

"I wondered why I hadn't seen them around..."

"Are they still alive?"

But although the voices could be heard, their figures were nowhere to be seen. It seemed they were hiding somewhere.

"Hoh! How dare you ignore my consultation about cabbage! If that's how it is, I have no choice but to get a little serious!"

"Precisely! It’s nothing but an imitation! Anyone who refuses to lend an ear to the lamentations of the common folk suffering from high cabbage prices—"

"To end up as nothing more than a mindless slaughtering machine!"

The voices of Naga and Keith rang out alternately.

"Hoh! We'll show you what true coordination looks like!"

"Indeed—an eye for an eye, a fusion for a fusion!"

"Tooo-yah!"

With a shout, Naga sliced through the air, performing a spinning jump—*twirl-twirl-thud!*—landing gracefully right in front of Keega, before the rest of the group.

"Hoha?"

Whatever Keega felt at the sight, the supposedly invincible monster came to a dead

halt.

The Naga who appeared was not wearing her usual, pointlessly skimpy outfit. While that mask covering her face remained unchanged for some reason, she was dressed in a black tuxedo and white gloves. A necktie was fastened neatly at the collar of her shirt.

Yes. She looked exactly—like a butler.

"....."

For a moment, Coggie let out a dazed murmur, not quite grasping what this implied.

"Wait, just a minute..."

".....The clothes.....?"

Amelia sensed something and muttered with a strained expression. She reached out and grabbed the clothes of Zelgadis, who had also sensed something and was silently attempting a "right-about-face" to flee.

Fusion for fusion.

And if Naga was wearing butler clothes—

Before they could even process the meaning and begin to evacuate:

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! A superficial fusion is meaningless! True friendship and trust are perfected here!"

Keith's voice rang out pitilessly. He leapt up in a vertical spin—*whir-r-r-r-r*—and landed with a *thud* beside Naga.

His entire body was shrouded in a cloak.

However, the spiked shoulder guards on his shoulders were unmistakable.

If so, then beneath that cloak—

"Hoh... now we are evenly matched."

Keith spoke with a straight face, slowly preparing to throw open the cloak—

"STOP IT—!"

Coggie shrieked, clutching her head.

Amelia, dripping with cold sweat, gripped Zelgadis's clothes as he desperately tried to escape in silence.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho... hoha-hoh?!? Hoha...!"

Even Keega seemed to be suffering some sort of shock.

If this kept up, they might actually be able to stop Keega.

But before that, our own hearts and brainwaves were going to stop.

"Wait a second, wait a second!"

Gourry rushed over in a panic, trying to hold Keith back.

Keith dodged the hand easily and smoothly.

"Is something the matter? Is there a problem?"

Keith asked as if nothing had happened.

".....Isn't there a single hero... who can stop that guy...?"

Gourry muttered, having lost even the spirit to pursue him further.

"Hiiiiiiiiii! Noooooooo! I've had enough!"

Coggie was simply screaming, while Bonnie just stood there blankly. Dorothy silently lit a new cigarette.

Gourry was already in despair; Zelgadis was still stubbornly attempting a silent escape; Amelia was holding him back, prepared to take him down with her if she had to die.

And amidst this frozen battlefield, Keega had also completely ceased its movement.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—"

Whether he knew what he was doing or not—no, with the expressionless face of a culprit who knew exactly what he was doing—Keith continued to wander and hop

about while still wrapped in his cloak.

Thwack.

"Ah!"

"By the way, he was a bean sprout recently..."

Gourry and Bonnie clamored at once.

Keith’s luck had run out when he got too close to Dorothy. He was struck squarely on the head by her and collapsed; Bonnie immediately and efficiently began shoveling rubble over him to bury him.

Zelgadis helped her in silence.

"For now, the crisis has passed!"

Amelia said in a trembling voice, wiping the sweat from her brow.

Beside her, Coggie was sobbing, evidently terrified by what had just happened.

"What a waste of time."

Dorothy’s flat mutter suggested that one threat had been removed.

But.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Ma-ha-ho-ha-ho-ho!"

It wasn't all over yet!

Keega, which had been cowering and playing dead, resumed its activity!

"Oh yeah, this guy was still here!"

Life is just like that.

"I totally forgot about him for a second because his presence got so thin!"

Dorothy picked up a rock even larger than the last one.

"I wonder what I should do. According to the doctor, I'm the type to have an easy delivery, but..."

"I told you, stop that!"

"I feel like you'd be reliable, but for now, just don't."

Coggie and Zelgadis stopped her immediately.

That said, there weren't many effective plans other than "having Dorothy beat it to a pulp."

Naturally, "reviving Keith" was out of the question.

"What are we supposed to doooo?"

Gourry, Amelia, and Zelgadis looked at Coggie’s tearful face, then met each other's eyes and gave a small nod.

The group was of one mind.

"Well..."

"For now..."

"Let's run!"

The castle collapsed. It collapsed because he wanted it to—of course—by his will.

Coggie, Bonnie, and Dorothy followed the three as they ran off, either crying, looking blank, or wearing a sullen pout.

There was nothing in this world that did not obey his will. Absolutely nothing. It was impossible.

—Um.

To be continued?

Help me, my honey.

And then.

Nonsensical words raced through his mind.

What should he do?

"Ho-ho-ha-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ha!"

The recovered Keega also began to run, chasing after them.

He was supposed to be a god.

Yes. He was supposed to be a god. At his will for the world to exist, the world was born. At his will for the town to exist, the town was born. But now.

Screams and explosions echoed from not too far behind him. A lukewarm blast of air drifted past.

Everything behind was darkness. He didn't know why.

"—Norinohakujinnnnnn—"

Something was suddenly born. No, he didn't even know what he was thinking anymore.

Where was he running to? There was no such thing. Wherever it was, this was a world he controlled. No matter where he was, he should have been safe.

A darkness where his will did not reach—his own rear.

Everywhere else was... supposed to be fine.

It was only a tiny part of the world, after all... right?

But a thought occurred to him.

Was that why he couldn't escape from anywhere? Even if he turned around, that darkness would still be there, because it was impossible for it to become the "front."

Thoughts he didn't want to think entered his head, and a chill he didn't want to feel ran through his body.

"Flare Arrow!"

A voice called out from somewhere, and something hot passed by his body. He didn't quite understand. He didn't understand, but he ran.

Somewhere on his body was supposed to be hurting. He no longer remembered.

It was just hot. It felt as if his throat, his eyelids, and his armpits had all swollen up.

If he couldn't breathe, couldn't see, and couldn't move his arms, he shouldn't have been able to run.

But he was running.

The world was moving.

He didn't know how such a thing was possible.

No. Was he the one moving?

That couldn't be. He had made the world.

If so, it had to be the world that was moving.

But if that was the case—why was it so painful?

The voice of a beast reached his ears, a distorted version of a word meaning "Wait." A hunting beast. Chasing him. Were its claws cold? Were its fangs hot?

"Do you really think you can escape?" A warped voice echoed through the ruins.

His vision. The world. Everything was distorted.

A vast darkness he had never seen before. No matter how immense that bottomless darkness was, it didn't matter. It was vast nonetheless. Vast. Vast.

Four.

His eyes reflected the wasteland of rubble. They reflected the swaying mist. Simultaneously, his eyes reflected infinite darkness.

"Gueee-gehehe... where is it..."

A third voice. There were supposed to be two beasts chasing him, weren't there?

"Are you still running? I can hear it... the sound of your heart..."

"...He hasn't noticed..."

"I CAN HEAR THE SOUND OF YOUR BLOOD FLOWING."

Five.

The voices were increasing.

"Hiiiiiiiiiii!?"

A clear voice—his own. No, was it really his own voice?

If it was truly his voice, why was he screaming? Why would the absolute being, the ruler, be terrified and scream?

It was ridiculous.

"Iiiiiiiiii—"

The screaming continued. Endlessly.

Somewhere else, another version of himself existed, quietly listening to it.

It was raining.

Once, he had made it rain in the world.

It had been a boring thing. The sound, the scenery. So he had stopped letting it fall ever again. And yet now, it was raining inside his ears. Unstopping noise. A violent, unending squall.

Was the sun he had hidden back then the thing burning his skin now?

".....jyugunojidengu."

"mojyoyugujinugumedo."

A flood of infinitely increasing sound.

And then, abruptly. He realized.

".....So this is where you were hiding....."

All the voices. All the sounds. They were all saying the same thing.

Once, he had caused a tornado. He forbade it because it messed up his hair. Once, he had created the sea. Once—

And then.

He thought of how many things he had done, just once.

Once, he had made a wish. A world without inhabitants to follow him was meaningless. The rain and the sun didn't matter. Once, he had made a wish. He wished for the world to have meaning. That wish was supposed to have been granted.

Meaning... meaning...

The darkness was behind him. If he turned around, there was light within that darkness. That was the meaning. But the light he saw illuminated two beasts from behind.

The last thing he heard was his own scream.

"Meaning!"

".....nobojyomugujimodo."

A blink.

"gunumajyutojyugura."

Yes. A blink.

Six, seven, eight, nine—the voices increased, the rain fell, the screaming didn't stop, and footsteps echoed.

Once, he had let the sun peek out. He covered the world in mist because the sunlight burned his skin. The heat currently searing his skin was—

When I looked around, I was amidst the rubble of the collapsed castle.

It seemed I had been hiding there, huddled down—I say "seemed" because it wasn't in my memory. Whether I had been sleeping in such a place or had fainted, I had no awareness of it. I just... well, I didn't know for sure, but I felt like I had been dreaming.

The light illuminated the beasts.

Two beasts with black and chestnut-colored fur respectively.

When I craned my neck to look, I could see Keega’s massive form running far—really

far—away. It seemed he had run an unbelievable distance to escape.

No. They weren't beasts. They were two—human samples?

Inhabitants. The ideal inhabitants of this world... was this it? It wasn't that these two were particularly special. It wasn't that at all. But.

It was a mere flash of insight, exactly the same as an impulse. Truly, just a flash.

A flash that seemed to laugh at its own pointlessness... meaning...

".....Hey. What are you spacing out for?"

The voice that leaked out was a familiar human voice.

".....Why is this guy having some kind of fit?....."

The voice leaking from the other beast sounded somewhat puzzled.

I slowly woke up—standing there looking down at me, exactly in the positions of the beasts I had seen in my "dream," were the two samples I had summoned to this world. If I recalled correctly... Lina Inverse and Orphen? Even as I marveled at the fact that I had remembered such meaningless individual names, I clasped my still-trembling hands in front of my chest and let out a sigh.

Lina stared at me—it was incredibly impudent to observe a god so closely—and I saw her open her mouth.

"Did you have a weird dream or something? ...Well, I won't press you on whether you were sleeping or fainted, but—"

"Eeeeeeeh~?"

I groaned and backed away. I twisted my shoulders, striking a posture of accusation

Lina Inverse. She was an inhabitant of a world ruled by a god who had been pitiably split into great rivals following a petty quarrel.

The one who noted this was Orphen—

I looked up at the two of them staring back at us expressionlessly, and when I spoke, my voice was so hoarse I could barely hear myself.

"Wh... what’s going to happen now...?"

"So? What’s the plan? We can’t just keep running forever!"

Orphen. He, too, had been summoned from a crumbling world, one foolishly trampled by a god who had fallen from grace.

(What on earth are these people...?)

They were inhabitants of worlds possessed only by imperfect gods—inferior even to those flawed deities. Why were such beings cornering me now? Me, the omnipotent God.

I wondered how long we had been running. It felt both like an eternity and a mere heartbeat.

".....I understand."

I lowered my heavy head. To an observer, it might have looked like a nod. For a god to agree with a mere inhabitant was a world-destroying taboo. It was something that absolutely could not happen.

Regardless, I continued.

"Let us reach a compromise, shall we?"

"Ho-hoh?"

"Give me three years to think. I shall also give you three years to think—"

Immediately.

"Zero."

Lina opened her mouth.

"The countdown. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Done."

"Aaah!? That’s too speedy!?"

Rather than a witty retort, Coggie’s response to Dorothy’s words was a half-sob. Her hands reached out pointlessly, as if trying to steady Dorothy’s waist.

"For now, we have to believe in Lina and... um, the person in black!"

Amelia made a powerful declaration.

"And then?"

When Gourry asked, Amelia avoided eye contact.

"We just believe!"

Coggie was the one who agreed with that declaration, despite its lack of confidence or persuasiveness.

"Believing... yes! After all, she did return that 10-socket bill she stole from my wallet! Without interest!"

There was a heavy dose of desperation in her voice.

"That's right! For some reason, as long as you're with her, you're never short on slippers!"

Gourry agreed, equally pointlessly.

Hearing everyone's encouraging words, Dorothy spoke to Zelgadis, who was running right beside her, her expression remaining blank.

".....For now, shouldn't we consider doing something ourselves?"

"I agree."

Zelgadis answered without hesitation. However, the crucial problem was the method.

"Oh. Master Orphen."

"Lina!"

The voices of Bonnie and Gourry came without warning or context.

When we stopped and turned around, we saw Orphen and Lina dragging a somewhat battered-looking object between them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

At Lina's tension-free voice, Amelia raised her eyebrows slightly.

"What were you doing, Lina! Why are you carrying a cracked pineapple—wait, that's not a pineapple, it's that person from before."

".....It took a while to drag him here."

Orphen spoke in the exact same tone one would use to say, "Bags of wheat are heavy, after all."

Amelia cast a somewhat worried look at the object being dragged.

"If I remember correctly... this was the victim, Demon King Voim-san... was it? No... um..."

The man who once called himself God murmured with utter humility.

"Yes. 'Victim' is fine..."

Lina and Orphen tossed him aside. In the direction of Orphen's gaze was the massive bulk of the approaching Keega.

"Anyway, the farce is over!"

Orphen raised his right hand.

"Basically, we've got permission. To put it simply—"

Lina winked at the group.

"It's all-you-can-shoot!"

She began her incantation. A lethal spell capable of slaying even a Great Dragon in a single blow. Beside her, Orphen also concentrated. He focused his spirit, raised his consciousness to weave the composition, and expanded it into space.

The embodiment of destruction: the Self-Destruction Chain.

And then.

"I see," said Zelgadis.

"If that's the case," Amelia began her own incantation.

"I don't really get it, but... Light come forth!"

Meanwhile, light was born from the sword in Gourry's hand.

Coggie readied the darts in her hand, Dorothy began her warm-up exercises, and Bonnie tried to hurl an insect, only for each of them to be stopped by someone.

As Keega's massive body closed in, multiple incantations flowed with the wind and melted into the mist.

And then, the spells were complete!

"Dragon...!"

"I am—"

The two casters from two different worlds—the Sorcerer and the Mage—spoke their voices in unison!

"Slave!"

"Break!"

"Sacred Sound of Destruction!"

Different powers from different worlds. They converged upon Keega!

BOOM!

The crimson light fired by Lina converged on the spot hit by Orphen's spell. Keega's body burst open, countless fissures appearing across it. Then, the lights fired by Zelgadis, Amelia, and Gourry pierced through—

K-BOOM!

An explosion occurred. A massive flash of light. The wind shivered. The earth shook.

Within the raging energy, Keega's massive form was caught in the torrent, crumbling like a dried clod of earth, returning to primordial dust.

—And then—

A stagnant roar. Even the echoes were mere noise, and the ground shook violently. The target, which possessed massive weight, was completely shattered; the power of

the explosion stirred the wind as it was. Everything followed the laws of destruction, returning to the chaos of nothingness. The castle was gone. The town had been mostly trampled and destroyed. And the giant "Ideal Inhabitant" was no more.

Perhaps there had never been such destruction in this world where destruction itself had been forbidden. If so, was the world cowering at this first-time experience? Was it trembling with joy? Such things were beyond imagination.

Protecting my face with my arm from the fragments, fine dust, and debris blown by the wind, I saw a shadow still visible within the explosion. Something moving in the dust... as if dancing in the distant afterglow.

".....No way!?"

Lina shrieked. It wasn't that I was following her lead, but I let out a groan as well.

".....What?"

Hidden in the dust, Keega's massive form had not vanished. It still retained its mass.

"It's impossible....."

I spat the words out in disbelief.

"It was a Self-Destruction Chain..."

Even though I had splurged on a Great Magic that rarely succeeds, not a single part should have remained.

The dust swirled up. Without mixing with the mist, it was blown away by the wind. The shadow grew darker. Suddenly, Voim stood up.

"As I thought... so it is. The Ultimate Inhabitant Keega... possesses infinite vitality. Its activity is eternal!"

"What...!? Eternal...?"

Lina repeated the despairing word. Voim carefully wiped his nosebleed and let out a great laugh.

"Exactly as the word implies! The Keega I created—even if destruction were possible, that would not be the end of it!"

He raised his tone boastfully, threw back his chest, and shouted toward the sky—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Feel the terr—GYAH!—"

Without a hitch, I kicked Voim over from behind.

"I thought you wanted us to defeat it, huh?"

"Ugh. It's fine, isn't it? Even if I forgot for a little bit."

Voim grumbled as he tumbled and dented the ground.

Contrary to the thinning dust, the tension rose. Even as I tried to catch my breath, the air itself felt depleted. I wiped the greasy sweat from my forehead with my palm and waited for Keega to reappear in my field of vision.

"......But... isn't it getting smaller?"

Amelia was the one who whispered it.

"Yeah, it really... looks small..."

"Hmph?"

Voim also craned his neck to look at Keega; he didn't particularly deny it. Constance agreed, though she seemed hesitant to get her hopes up.

Ho ho ha ha ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ha ha

The laughter had changed slightly as well.

".............Um..."

Lina's voice sounded exhausted from the repeated "difficult problems"—for lack of a better term. It was hoarse and trailed off. I muttered the rest.

"......Just the head?"

Only Keega's head stood there. From the neck of that grotesque object, with the faces of Naga and Keith plastered on it, legs were growing. There were four legs in total, clearly not matching the scale of the faces. Two were women's legs. The rest were men's.

"Legs are coming out. From the bottom."

Gourry pointed out exactly what he saw. Beside him, Amelia fretted in confusion.

"W... what should we do? About that?"

"Don't ask me."

Zelgadis groaned, equally at a loss for words.

I crossed my arms while staring blankly at the thing.

"Hmm. An object this difficult to react to is..."

"It looks fun, though."

Ignoring Constance and Bonnie nodding to each other, Dorothy started walking at a steady pace toward the laughing Keega, her expression remaining unreadable as always. Even at a fast walk, there was a fair distance. We watched her walk for several minutes.

During that time, we were forced to listen to Keega's laughter in total silence. It was the kind of voice that made you feel like everything was becoming irrelevant the more you heard it.

Approaching Keega, Dorothy took the cigarette she had been holding between her fingers and pressed the lit end directly into Keega's leg.

Ho-ho-ha-ha!

Keega let out something like a scream, lost its balance, and fell over.

Its previous good mood vanished entirely, and Keega began to make a fuss, thrashing its legs about. Moreover, because it had fallen on its face, it couldn't even make a proper sound.

Mugomaga...

It tried to cry out occasionally, but apparently dirt kept getting in its mouth, and it coughed every single time.

I put my hand to my temple. A hypothesis had occurred to me, but it was too pathetic

to voice.

"Could it be..."

"It can't... get up?"

We all stared at the thrashing Keega in silence. By the time Dorothy returned after another few minutes, Lina finally let out a breath.

"It's just too beyond help."

Whether one was merely exasperated or it was truly beyond salvation... such a loop came to mind. To break it, there was nothing left but to stop thinking.

"......Eternal..."

Voim repeated the word. It was the word he had proudly declared earlier, but now its despairing meaning had completely changed.

"Eternal, huh?"

I nodded and gave him a few pats on the shoulder. There was no reaction from Voim.

Lina also scratched her head with her gloved hand.

".....Well... it's something like that."

"What 'something'? What is that?"

The one who asked back on behalf of everyone was Zelgadis, his voice full of displeasure.

A week. A time that felt both long and short.

People say, "Wherever you live is home." That isn't entirely a lie.

In the end, it was nothing much. The man calling himself God had actually taken proper measures after the failure with the insects. From the start.

Namely: after a week had passed, Orphen, Lina, and the others would naturally return to their original worlds.

When the mist cleared and the sun shone, the scenery of the town changed

completely.

I didn't know why Voim had cleared the mist or made the sun shine. Perhaps it was a simple whim. He didn't even seem to have the urge to fix the castle, nor the destroyed town. He muttered several times over the course of the week that he would just rebuild it from scratch eventually.

".....In the end, what was that whole fuss about.....?"

Lina muttered. Beside her was a large insect that had come from another world. At first, we were surprised, but once we got used to seeing them, they were no big deal.

"Aah... well, being this peaceful with nothing happening is boring in its own way."

I spoke as I sprawled out on a comfortable seat.

The week spent here wasn't so bad. The self-proclaimed God—who had become somewhat humble, or rather, had learned some common sense—provided whatever meals we wanted.

A short distance away, Coggie and Bonnie were using several insects as mounts and having races. The lack of entertainment was a bit of a flaw, given that we were reduced to killing time like this. At the finish line, Keith, who had revived at some point, was waving a checkered flag.

"Isn't peace nice? Though it's true my skills might get rusty if it's this peaceful."

Amelia spoke, relaxing comfortably.

"I don't like boredom... well, I'm not saying I like trouble, either."

Zelgadis, standing at a cynical angle, didn't actually seem to mind it that much.

"Peace and boredom just have to coexist, I suppose."

Dorothy spoke in a disinterested tone as she moved her brush. I didn't know where she got the tools or if she made "God" provide them, but she had been painting watercolors for a while now.

When Gourry peeked in from the side, it seemed she was painting Zelgadis; the title was "Rock."

"Heh. It's actually pretty well drawn. Wait, what's wrong, Zel? Your eyes look scary."

"I thought I'd leave something behind, since it's a rare item."

".....A rare..... item....."

Zelgadis spoke to Dorothy as she murmured without really answering.

"Give me a break."

He muttered with a look of extreme displeasure.

A little distance away, the man who once called himself God was being forced to listen to Naga—who was also alive—ramble endlessly about the current market price of cauliflower. Why Naga was still wearing her mask remained a mystery.

The self-proclaimed God nodded dutifully to the topic of how harvest times differed depending on the weather—and then his gaze suddenly shifted past Naga.

"Oh. Is it that time already?"

There stood a human-sized Elder Insect, appearing out of nowhere. The insects that had been enjoying the race immediately ran over to the Elder, and Coggie and the others slid down from their backs.

Chapter 5: The Ultimate Inhabitant

Coggie and Bonnie fell to the ground with a soft *thud*.

"---Well, listening to stories about other worlds and such was interesting, anyway. It doesn't quite sink in that the memory of being here will vanish once we return to our original worlds---Hm?"

Orphen, who had been talking with Lina and the others, noticed something and looked up. Lina noticed it too and stood up from her chair.

"The other insects have already been repatriated."

It was the voice of the one calling himself God.

"Repatriated? To the humus soil?"

"If I return those who are here, I can close the summoning path to Iyandeth. To be honest, long-term summoning is quite dangerous."

Feeling a vague sense of unease, Lina repeated his words as a question. "Dangerous?"

"No, it's only the maintenance that is dangerous. There's no problem with the summoning or the return. Well, I doubt you'd understand even if I spoke of ultra-dimensional semantic lifelines."

"...I can't tell if that's high-level or just nonsense..."

"I see. So they're going home. The insects too."

"Back to the humus soil."

Amelia sounded deeply moved, while Coggie sounded somewhat dismissive.

Amelia walked up to the insects and stared intently into the Elder's eyes---well, since the subject had compound eyes, it was doubtful whether it was actually looking back at her...

Regardless, she spoke solemnly. "They said we'd forget everything once we return to our original worlds... but as for me..."

She offered these mysterious words with moist eyes to the standing insects. "As for me... I'll always think of you all as swallowtail butterfly larvae."

Bonnie made several frantic gestures toward the lingering insects, then spun around toward the group---specifically toward Orphen. "That means, 'Take care on your journey.' Come now, everyone together."

"No, wait, I'd really like to pass on that."

"Good for you. Stay healthy."

At Gourry's greeting, the insect Elder responded with a *ko-ki-ki-ki* gesture, which Bonnie translated. "It says, 'Thank you, heroes.'"

She added with an even brighter smile, "It says, 'If the day ever comes that we meet again, help us out again.'"

"Are these guys just in trouble 365 days a year?" Orphen muttered in a cold tone, as if he had expected as much.

While they exchanged words, and without the man calling himself God appearing to do anything at all, the insects vanished one by one. Lina waved her hand. I didn't know if the meaning got across.

The Elder and its child vanished, finally waving their hands in a gesture mimicking humans for the very first time.

Afterward, only the lingering trace of a farewell remained.

".....They've gone. No... they've returned."

Amelia muttered while staring at the spot where the insects had vanished. Orphen put his hands on his hips and took a breath.

"Well. Given the situation, it's about time for us too, I guess."

"In terms of time, it is nearly the hour."

".....Yeah. Looking at the time."

At the self-proclaimed God's affirmation, Lina agreed---and held her hand out toward Orphen. It wasn't a handshake. They raised their hands to face level and struck them

together with a *clap*.

"Well, even if he says memories vanish, it's just what this guy is saying."

Orphen shifted his gaze to the god-like thing. "I might just happen to not forget."

"Well, that would be another kind of amusement, I suppose."

"Well, I will probably remember."

Keith spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and Orphen turned a disgusted, half-lidded gaze toward him. "When you say it, it actually sounds real."

Their forms grew hazy and faint, like mist dissolving into the atmosphere.

"See ya later, then."

To the friends from different worlds. And then, Amelia called out her parting words. "Take care."

To the god of this world as well.

"I'll definitely never forget you guys."

"It’s not very convincing when you say it."

Zelgadis retorted to Gourry's words.

Dorothy, who had stepped out of the circle of greetings, silently tucked her unfinished watercolor under her arm.

"Umu."

The man calling himself God nodded, paused for a beat---no, three beats---and then looked over everyone with a magnanimous air. ".....I may have caused you some trouble."

His attitude in this regard had not changed.

"Some trouble---"

"Well, it *was* a nuisance."

Unlike Lina, who started to retort but stopped, Coggie stated it flatly.

Bonnie continued cheerfully, "Our daily lives are mostly just one nuisance after another, anyway. Always."

"That would be you," Orphen cut in from the side.

"Please don't worry about it," Amelia followed up with a bright smile. "Once it's over, it's just a painful memory."

"That wasn't a follow-up at all," Zelgadis said in a quiet tone.

".....Uhm....."

The man calling himself God nodded vaguely.

From his perspective, the guests from another world were already gradually fading away. The time for parting was nearly here. Before that, there was something he truly wanted to say to them. Words he had to speak.

He opened his mouth hesitantly.

"Heh. Well, I suppose it served as a decent way to kill some time."

The words that were about to come out were cut off by Naga’s voice. She looked toward Keith. "You---you were quite something. I guess the world hasn't quite gone to the dogs yet."

"Heh... To have finally come to a place like this and witnessed such true nobility..."

The butler responded to the sorceress. What passed between them was the gaze of those who acknowledged one another.

In the silence that was born in that instant, Voim made up his mind. He would speak the words he needed to say.

"Um..."

The group's gaze concentrated on him. In the midst of that, he pointed.

Right beside him, he pointed at the head of Keega, which was still thrashing about mindlessly.

"By the way... what should I do about this?"

"LIKE WE'D KNOW!" The collective voices of the group echoed into the sky of the alien world!

[Extra Chapter] Voim Land

"Why were we called here again?"

"Um. It's not like I'm exactly free, either."

Things I had once completely forgotten---or rather, had been made to forget---I now remembered clearly for some reason. It was a strange sensation. It was different from déjà vu. To add to that, it wasn't a comfortable feeling. Perhaps because of that, he was somewhat displeased.

Sitting in a guest chair at a table, he looked out of the corner of his eye. The same could be read from the expression of the girl sitting with him. This was Lina's voice.

"The truth of the matter is, this world, my beautiful world, is nearing completion as 'Voim Land.' However..."

And the one sitting in the master's seat was a man who looked somewhat like a delusional king. A god-ish thing. The king-ish thing of this world. In short, the god-ish thing.

"That being the case, I am worried that villains, evil gods, planeswalkers, lords of chaos, and the like might all come swarming in to target this wonderful paradise."

The god-ish thing acted shocked, as if Lina’s words were entirely unexpected.

The interior of the castle was not much different from the previous visit. It was supposed to have been completely destroyed once, but it would have been trivial for the master of this castle to repair it exactly as it was. There were minor changes here and there, but it remained as quiet and devoid of people as ever.

The mist that had covered the town was gone. Even so, the only thing to be seen was a deserted town. Because the sun was out, it was bright outside the windows. Also, likely a new addition, beautiful stained glass for natural light occupied most of the ceiling. The decorations were magnificent, but the pattern featured a sorceress and a perverted butler holding hands and laughing...

Sorceress. Suddenly, he repeated the word. It seemed she existed through a logic entirely different from the sorcerers he knew---knew inside out. It was an ability

rooted in a different world.

He looked at the girl once more. This person, who at first glance seemed both delicate and harmless, was the first inhabitant of another world he had encountered. And now, the world they were in wasn't even the world she belonged to. It was a different world for her as well. It was complicated.

"And so," Orphen asked, either to hide his irritation or to vent it. Not to Lina. It was to the two of them... to the god-ish thing that had summoned them here.

"What's it to you? What kind of business did you have? Vertebrates just do things like breathe and eat food every day."

It wasn't irony or sarcasm. He likely meant it from the bottom of his heart. Lina groaned.

"Right, right. I'm busy with breathing and eating and thinking about charring the guy who suddenly summoned me."

To the Voim who looked blankly puzzled, Orphen added, "What do you mean, just eating every day? I haven't eaten a thing for about two days."

However, Voim---the master, creator, and god-ish thing of this world---didn't seem to care much and casually waved them off.

"Now, now. You would do well to fall silent like a pile of trash. Naturally, even I would not summon you without business."

".....If you're saying that, I assume this 'business' of yours is something pretty important? What is it?"

Lina asked in a tone that suggested she wasn't expecting much. Voim looked solemn and stared straight at the two of them.

"It looks like there's still a thrashing object rolling around outside," Orphen pointed out the window with a flat gaze. Voim also shifted his gaze to the thrashing thing visible there. He clenched his fists, as if praying to something despite being a god-ish thing.

"Beautiful..... I will surely protect it."

".....I see. There might be some eccentric Chaos out there with a different sense of

aesthetics..."

Lina muttered as if troubled. Well, there was nothing to do but be troubled.

Voim spun around, anxiety appearing on his face once more.

"Even for me, should I be targeted by such evil beings, I might not be able to oppose them all alone."

"Alone? What happened to the inhabitants from before?"

When Lina spoke, blinking her large eyes, Voim struck a finger-pointing pose as if he'd been waiting for that question. It didn't seem to have much meaning, but he clearly wanted to be asked about this topic.

"Currently, we are not yet in a mass-production phase for inhabitants. It seems that for some reason, the Ultimate Inhabitant Keega can only exist as one in the world. Perhaps it is because it is the ultimate that it is unique."

"Or rather, maybe there's a rule that a world infested by a mass of those things can't exist? I certainly hope so," Orphen pointed out.

Ignoring him, Voim continued. He pointed his index finger sharply at the two of them several times.

"That is why I remembered you. Inhabitants of a primitive world of unending conflict. Beasts who love bloodthirstiness, ferocity, and skinning things alive. But even such heartless combat organisms might be useful if limited to this purpose."

"Heh-heh-heh. It's true that right now, I kind of feel like skinning something alive."

Lina, glaring at the god-ish thing's thin fingertip, growled in a low voice---though Voim himself just tilted his head slightly. It seemed it hadn't gotten through to him.

"I wonder why. I feel as though the ferocity of the animals is rising. Could it be environmental hormones? No, my world is supposed to be perfect."

"I don't think skinning something is going to fix... well, any of this."

He placed his hand on his forehead to suppress a slight dizziness. Then, as if wanting to get back to the topic, Voim cleared his throat loudly. He didn't even need to do that for us to listen.

"At any rate. Since you were born and raised in such an inferior world, you surely know of many terrifying things."

He spoke as if it were a perfectly natural conclusion.

Orphen started to look up at the ceiling with an "Umm," but the stained glass mentioned earlier accidentally entered his field of vision, and he hurried to look back down. It was a truly restless environment.

"To be sure, I understand the feeling of looking at my paradise, which is peace itself, and feeling ashamed of your own chilly, pitch-black, wretched lives. It's like that, isn't it? You're constantly shooting hyper-radioactive missiles at each other on a daily basis, right?"

I didn't quite understand what he was saying, but since I understood this god-ish thing's vibe all too well by now, I just held my head in my hands. Lina spoke up.

"As far as I know, I think the scariest thing is a life where you don't know how to speak properly."

Orphen expected Voim to just tilt his head in confusion again... but the reaction was a bit different.

"Oh, I see."

After letting out a sound of understanding, he waved his arms unnaturally while mumbling something. Even if it was a gesture for an incantation or something similar, the fact that it looked excessively suspicious might have just been because of how this god-ish thing was dressed---regardless, even as the two of them stared blankly, nothing happened.

I heard Voim mutter as if troubled. "Uhm. I thought I would try to create this 'life where one doesn't know how to speak properly,' but it seems I cannot. I've just realized, is it perhaps a bit too abstract?"

"Hah?" Lina groaned, furrowing her brows.

Orphen looked at her for a moment and voiced his guess. "In short, you're saying you want to summon the terrifying things we mention here and use them as watchdogs?"

"Well, it's different from summoning. I'm making copies here. With summoning, I'd have to return them eventually, or the space-time split zones... well, I'll skip the

explanation."

Voim said his piece, then clapped his hands together loudly. "Now, tell me the thing that is most terrifying to you!"

"Manju."

"Strong tea."

".....You two aren't into this at all, are you?"

Voim spoke, his mustache drooping as if he were a bit discouraged. Orphen leaned back into his chair and laced his hands behind his head.

"Even if you say that..."

Lina seemed to be thinking it over for a while, then, as if she'd thought of something: "Then it doesn't have to be 'terrifying,' it can just be 'strong,' right?"

"Hmm? Are 'terrifying' and 'strong' different? Very well. Regardless, I shall make the mighty thing created thus into the guardian of this world! And happiness shall gather in this perfectly protected paradise!"

To the emphatically speaking Voim, Lina whispered a question back. A look of genuine doubt appeared in her large eyes.

"Will they gather, I wonder..."

In contrast to her doubt, Voim was brimming with confidence from head to toe.

"They will gather! In fact, they will implode!"

"Implode?"

"Happiness clustered together like a rice ball, you see..."

"No, please, stop with the metaphors that are impossible to respond to."

I groaned at Voim, who was making gestures as if packing something together with both hands. It felt utterly impossible to keep up with him.

Voim looked regretful, casting a pitiable gaze as if he wanted to say more, but he quickly regained his composure and puffed out his chest in his chair. He peered at us

through the gaps in his lower eyelashes, looking pointlessly proud. I wondered if he intended to show some kind of clincher to an unenthusiastic audience.

"So, does that mean you're going to give us something?"

As if by reflex, Lina's eyes sparkled slightly and she leaned forward. Voim nodded magnanimously.

"I have learned a bit from previous events. I shall not say it is free, provided I am asking a favor."

At the same time, he pulled a human-sized lump from under the table.

"Umu. This Keega body pillow has been quite well-received—"

Before he could finish his sentence, I had already circled behind Voim. I reached out from the shadows, grabbed the god-ish thing's thin neck, and whispered in a muffled voice.

"Pray to God. And sleep."

It wasn't a metaphor or anything of the sort.

"Whoa, it's turned into a silent-but-deadly assassination plot!" Voim shrieked, waving his arms like a chicken about to be plucked.

"Wait! I just wanted to say that for research purposes! Think about it—after I send you back, I cannot leave information about this world behind, so I cannot let you take things back with you. Furthermore, when it comes to a god who is the root of existence, it means one must mimic even the system by which that god transforms the world. Thus, it could lead to creating another entirely different world inside this one. In a Wave Motion Engine-style sci-fi sense, interfering with other worlds is troublesome. Your god is currently in a state where proper negotiation isn't even possible."

When I let go of Voim, who was desperately making excuses, Lina seemed to have thought of something else.

"God? ...Well, I heard the god in my place is already destroyed. But if you're saying it's a copy, does it really matter whether they're destroyed or not?"

"Hmm? Are you suggesting I should replicate your god in my world?" Voim asked

back—and Lina gave a firm nod.

"I definitely think they'd be the best fit for a guardian."

However, Voim closed his eyes and his expression turned difficult. He wrestled with a bitter groan, but eventually, it turned into an explanation.

"The nature of a god for a particular world is rooted in the world itself. It is not that simple."

"Is that how it works?"

"Gods do sometimes leave their own worlds and move to different ones. But they must always return. Different worlds are not 'different' for show. I cannot keep even puny existences like you summoned indefinitely. If it were just the likes of you, I could mimic and construct a replica in this world, but if it's the god who is the very foundation of existence, well—"

Lina nodded along with Voim's long-winded explanation, even as she tilted her head.

"I don't quite get it, but... basically, it's 'to each world its own god,' right?"

"But if that's the case... even if you suddenly ask for 'something suitable for a guardian'..."

She suddenly turned her eyes toward me. Nodding, I also voiced my doubts.

"Hey."

Lina muttered to herself for a bit before tossing the conversation my way.

"In my place, if you're talking about 'strong,' then the Monster Race is strong... but they don't exactly feel like 'guardians.' Besides, if you're saying their nature is tied to the world or whatever, then they're probably no good... By the way, in your place, what kind of strong things are there? Hey."

"Strong, huh... I don't really interact with that sort of thing much. Maybe the Dragon Race? But they're all just about dying out."

"They are surprisingly unreliable fellows," Voim complained.

Ignoring him for the moment, Lina's face twitched.

"Dying dragons!? No, we have things called dragons in my place too... but they aren't exactly 'dying' over there."

"Well, the healthy ones are healthy, I guess, but if you meet them, they usually kill you."

In reality, on the continent of Kiesalhima, it was rare for the Human Race to encounter the Dragon Race. There were even those who doubted their existence. Part of the reason was that their habitats were separated from the Human Race's, but it was also because people were usually killed if they met one, so there were few eyewitness reports.

"They kill you. But if that's the case, aren't they plenty strong?"

I nodded at Lina's point.

"I guess so. But do you have the Dragon Race over there too?" I asked. I hadn't imagined such things would exist in another world. Lina replied with something dangerous as if it were common knowledge.

"Yeah. Well, the dragons in my place are plenty a threat to ordinary people."

"...The way you put that... does it mean they aren't a threat if you're not ordinary?"

"Well..."

Just as she was about to say it boastfully, her expression suddenly clouded over and she shivered as if she felt a chill.

"Some of them use really nasty mental attacks," Lina corrected herself.

Her face had turned pale, as if she were recalling a personal experience. That part was the same as back home. I remembered something and said:

"Mental control, huh? Yeah, we have those too."

It was knowledge I had only read in an encyclopedia long ago, but I had seen a description stating that one type of the Dragon Race performs powerful mental control. It was an unconditional magical attack that acted not just on living creatures, but even on inanimate objects and space itself. It was even said that throughout history, no human sorcerer has ever defeated one of those Deep Dragons. Though, I hadn't heard of human sorcerers having an advantage against other dragon types

either, so in terms of being a threat, there didn't seem to be much difference between any of the Dragon Races.

"Then let us replicate one outside immediately! For the eternal prosperity of Voim Land!"

Dragons. Things to be feared, things to be revered. A dignified god-ish thing who rules a world full of order, with those invincible beings at his feet. His beauty was beyond comparison, and his divinity was clear even with eyes closed.

The one who dragged the god-ish thing out of that self-beautifying, ecstatic dream was one of the guests—Lina.

"Hold on a sec."

"Before that, what about our reward? Other than the pillow."

Voim did not find her brazen demand to be rude or presumptuous. His generosity was equal to the universe. To use a metaphor, it was like the cellophane around a cake, which a puny human might ask God for without licking the cream off first.

At the guest's demand, Voim nodded magnanimously. He rolled the words that shape the world around in his mouth and made a yellow, squirming thing appear out of the void.

"This Keega eye pillow is also quite popular, as it almost certainly lets you see dreams of—"

Lina gave a full-faced smile, seemingly satisfied with the reward—but for some reason, she spoke to me instead of Voim.

"By the way, I've thought of about two hundred ways to crush a person. You want to see them now?"

"What a coincidence. I've been thinking of efficient ways to roll a person up myself."

"Whoa, it sounds busy being crushed and rolled up!"

Voim stuck out his chest and announced grandly:

"I cannot let you take things from this world back with you, nor can I interfere with another world using my power to create something."

"Hoh."

This time it was my turn. While imagining the look on his indifferent face as he wept tears of gratitude at the plan I was about to propose, he spoke:

"Therefore, it is best if I reward you within my world. Now, here, the comfort of this Keega-model bed—"

For some reason, the guests just turned a cold gaze toward the god-ish thing.

"Hoh," Lina muttered.

Come to think of it, for combat organisms whose only merit was being raised in a wretched, sinister, broken world, it was the height of impossibility to understand everything from a single word from the god-ish thing. In that case, it was his duty as the master of the world to explain it in a way they could understand. Reconsidering, Voim elegantly crossed his legs.

"Regarding the reward, I have a plan."

Expecting a standing ovation and shouts of "Bravo!" for his broad-minded statement, he paused—

Suddenly, the sole of a foot appeared in Voim's field of vision. *Thwack*.

"You haven't thought of anything, have you!"

After recognizing that he had been kicked, my voice echoed. Voim was shocked by that fact!

Apparently, the bipedal animal who understood nothing of refinement didn't like the current proposal either. But normally, a protest of dislike should be made before the kick.

Thus, there was only one answer to be derived. The kick I unleashed exceeded the speed of sound, which was why the protest was heard after the kick!

Without a shred of doubt in his own incorrect reasoning, the god-ish thing once again savored the terror of the combative race.

"T-Then, at the very least... er, while you are in this world, I shall let you have whatever you desire."

He approached the negotiation with maximum concessions. Even with him being this humble, Lina and I exchanged unsatisfied looks.

".....Come to think of it, it was like this last time too... In the end, he won't let us go back until we do something, right?"

"Good grief, anything goes? Hey... hm?"

"Umu. Whether it is satisfying a foolish desire or anything else."

When asked, he nodded magnanimously. Lina looked down and muttered to herself.

"Chest... no... if it just goes back to the way it was when I return to my original world, that's just sad..."

She thought for a while, muttering something, and then—

"I know!"

She looked up at me.

"Since we can't take stuff back, how about we each bring out the most luxurious food we've ever eaten and trade? I want to try cooking from another world too!"

"Ah, I see. True, it's not like I'd get to eat that under any other circumstances."

The matter seemed to be decided. Lina looked at Voim.

"This sort of thing is fine, right?"

What a modest, modest wish.

He didn't know the values of these life forms whose brains were just blistered masses, but compared to a night's sleep with a Keega eye pillow or a Keega bed, such a reward didn't even reach one-ten-thousandth—no, one-one-hundred-millionth.

Feeling almost a sense of endearment for such a tiny wish, rather than seeing it as foolish, the god-ish thing puffed out his chest.

"If that is all you require, I can do as much as you like. Bow down, bow down!"

"Then mine is..."

"This is not just a can of peaches."

It was a presence known as "Peach Cans" in the world where the sorcerer lived. Before that object, the sorcerer in black let a smile of absolute confidence float across his face.

"Wait, I..."

Without waiting for the rest of my sentence, the god-ish thing began the summoning. He moved his limbs, looking slowly at Voim and Lina with the tone of an archaeologist telling a novice the value of a newly discovered ruin.

He was embodying the finest feast a person could imagine. Perhaps Voim's form appeared elegant and magnificent to the guests. Naturally, he hadn't looked in a mirror at his own appearance at that moment, but he was certain that the form of a god-ish thing creating part of the world couldn't possibly be anything but beautiful.

As proof, the guests slightly averted their eyes from Voim’s dancing limbs. They likely instinctively realized that if they burned ultimate beauty into their eyes, they would never again feel beauty in anything else in their own world.

The summoning took an instant. Space made a small *pop* sound, and something appeared before the group.

Lina, seeing it, furrowed her brows. To her, this unknown thing likely looked like nothing more than a lump of metal. Of course, Voim knew what it was.

However.

".....I brought it out myself, but why is it this specific thing?"

".....Synthetic.....?"

"Well I missed the sale day, it’s a peach can at the regular price! This luxury! It could destroy a capital in a single night!"

"......Ugh..... it looks like our food cultures are quite different."

Lina muttered with a frown.

Only in this specific matter did Voim, who did not require low-life-sustaining acts like eating, agree with Lina.

"I mean... how do you eat it? That iron thing."

At Lina's question, I spoke like a parent teaching a young child.

"Hm? You don't know what a tin can is?"

"Never heard of it. What is it? There's a picture of a peach on it, though..."

"There’s fruit inside. It’s hermetically sealed, so you can preserve food without it drying out."

"Huh. So it's an iron container."

She stared curiously for a while at the container from a different world and the alien pictures and letters marked upon it.

"And how do you open it?"

Inside were cream-colored pieces of fruit soaked in transparent syrup. My movements stopped.

It was hard to believe from Voim’s perspective, but for a moment, even my breathing, heartbeat, and pulse stopped completely—

"Hoh-ho-ho-ho! Ma-ha-ho-ha-ho-ho!"

With the voice, the lid popped open. With the restart of his life, I slowly turned back toward Voim.

".....Where’s the can opener?"

"Who knows."

Even when asked, the only thing the sorcerer had imagined was the peach can. I turned back to Lina with a sigh.

"And that’s the punchline."

"Huh?"

The sorceress didn't understand. She looked back and forth between Voim and me.

"Wait, judging by the atmosphere..." A blue vein began to pulse at her temple. She

had understood the situation. "...It won't open?"

Seeing that as a danger signal, or perhaps having intended to do so from the start, I calmly picked up the tin can and wove the magical composition.

"Thou uninvited gate that I tread upon!"

Screech!

"Behold! Here is the peak of luxury that overturns heaven and earth!"

I held it out with total confidence. Lina's eyes sparkled.

"There’s a spell that can do that! Then this time, my..."

Lina brought to mind the image of food, and Voim immediately used what he thought were elegant movements to embody them one after another.

Caesar salad with roasted duck and cream stew of local chicken. Shellfish grilled with parsley butter and steamed lobster in white wine, and a beef steak sprinkled with slices of fragrant mushrooms. Several types of freshly baked bread as well. Forks, knives, and spoons came with them.

Witnessing these—

My voice went up an octave.

"This is!?"

My face was whiter than marble, and the corners of my eyes were pulled up as if twitching.

"No way... surely not."

At this unusual behavior, Lina’s expression clouded.

"Huh? Is something... wrong?"

Whether that murmur reached my ears or not, I slumped to the floor on my knees.

"I won't hurt people anymore. I will love my neighbor, and pick up trash in the park on my days off."

I began making a vow to something. Naturally, Voim believed without a doubt that it

was meant for him.

The current Orphen was no longer Orphen. It was as if a possession had been lifted; the sharpness was gone from my expression, and my eyes were those of a boy who believed the world was full of hope.

Voim knew. That was the face Orphen had when he was called by another name. The boyhood he spent happily (?) with his two strangely kind older sisters.

Thus, Voim understood what had happened to Orphen.

"It seems the shock was enough to break his personality."

"Huh? What?"

Lina didn't understand the situation. Wondering if she had made some mistake, she tentatively started to speak.

"This is no good. If it's this, then something else..."

"SKREEEEEEEE!"

The tentatively started words were cut off by the sound of a broken bicycle brake—rather, the threatening sound I let out.

"Whaaat!?"

Lina pulled back without knowing why. Apparently, I had realized that by doing so, I could protect my most precious thing.

"Wow. There’s a fairy dancing behind the flower. Tee-hee."

Dancing left and right, I approached the meal. I looked like a carnivore trying to circle around a herd of herbivores.

".....It seems best to leave him alone."

Lina nodded slightly at Voim’s opinion.

"Well... if you say so... now then."

Lina rubbed her hands together, her eyes sparkling. She took the fork that had appeared with her meal and pierced a piece of the white fruit sitting in the syrupy

liquid.

She stuffed her mouth full—

"That is only natural."

"It's just a peach."

Voim nodded. Even in the sorceress's world, there should be peaches soaked in syrup for making sweets. I wondered what on earth she had expected.

"No, I mean..."

Even so, Lina looked back and forth longingly between Voim, Orphen, and the peach can. She took another bite of the peach.

"It's just a peach."

She groaned in despair for some reason and slumped her shoulders in defeat.

"Welcome home, m'lady—!"

BAM!

The word wasn't quite a sound, but regardless of that, a miniature coliseum-like structure had suddenly manifested in the courtyard of Voim's castle. It was a circular stone arena with entrance gates on the left and right, and the surrounding walls were, of course, lined with spectator seating. While not a single soul was present, it looked capable of holding hundreds. Led by Voim, we were taken to a place resembling a VIP box, situated even higher than those seats. Clouds were visible, but the blue sky was wider, and the sunlight poured down brilliantly.

The VIP box had a roof, but the light reflecting off the stone floor was blinding; I raised a hand to shield my eyes. Voim raised his voice as if to ensure it echoed through that vast space.

"Now, at this very moment, a momentous step in history shall be engraved!"

He swept his cloak back with a flourish and, despite being a god-ish thing, raised one arm in a gesture that looked like he was granting an audience.

"From your respective worlds, I shall create the ultimate Dragon Legion to serve as my

minions! Now, bring them to mind!"

"Yeah, yeah. Let’s get this over with quickly. ...If we’re talking about the strongest dragon..."

Lina had become entirely unenthusiastic, but she seemed to concentrate as she muttered. I followed suit and visualized exactly what I knew.

"I guess it’s gotta be that one... probably."

And then, from the floor in the center of the courtyard, a shadow loomed. What was initially just a hazy mass quickly grew beyond human size, transforming into the shape of a bizarre monster. For now, the thing I had imagined was the only dragon race I had ever actually encountered. You could say this is about the only dragon type that the Human Race normally runs into. The hooves on the four limbs supporting its massive body gouged the flagstones by weight alone. As the materialization progressed, the cracks in the floor grew larger.

(Wait... is it breaking?)

I was suspicious, but come to think of it, even if Voim was protecting the materials, it was inherently possible for one substance in this world to break another. In other words, that dragon species currently appearing was indeed a replica created by Voim.

As I watched, the replica reached completion. It took the form of a rhinoceros carrying a tower on its back. The Mist Dragon race.

"...Huh?"

That was Lina’s voice. She sounded puzzled, as if she felt something was off while looking at the Mist Dragon.

"...A dragon?"

The Mist Dragon spewed steam, making a mechanical turbine noise and causing the ground to shiver with a weight that far exceeded its appearance. At the same time, the sky grew dark. An even more massive shadow appeared in the air.

Orphen, for his part, looked up at the thing appearing in the sky and blinked. He compared it to the pendant on his chest and groaned.

"It's a little different from my image..."

The Black Dragon—there was really no other way to call it—was also gradually taking a clear shape, but it was ironic that as it materialized, its unbelievable strangeness only increased. If the Mist Dragon filled the arena floor, the Black Dragon was large enough to occupy the sky.

It looked like an indiscernible pattern swirling within a nightmare. No scales glittered on its skin, which was as black as night. Its long, elongated neck moved nimbly left and right as if bewildered by an unfamiliar world. On its two arms, separate from its wings, were five claws each that looked capable of crushing a human without effort, and the claws on its two legs were twice as large again.

(What the hell is that...)

"What" was the only way to put it. I grew tired of looking at the dragon and glanced at Lina. She was looking back at me as if troubled. However, she was pointing at the Mist Dragon in the arena.

"Somehow... that one over there is a bit different from my image of a dragon too... Is it supposed to look like that?"

"Well, 'Dragon Race' doesn't mean they're all the same species. It wouldn't be strange regardless of what they look like."

I was telling myself the logic more to calm myself down. That said, the Black Dragon currently flying in the sky resembled the one and only "True Dragon" spoken of in legends—the one passed down as a symbol of power.

The only one who might have even a slight chance of explaining this discrepancy was Voim, the master of this castle. But when I looked, the god-ish thing seemed to be in raptures over the two great monsters he had created. His pale face was flushed, and he was clapping his hands in applause.

"Ohh! This is truly fitting for my subordinates—"

The words cut off there because, suddenly, a portion of the VIP seating blew away.

A single shock and the sound of an explosion. Before the step Voim was about to take could even land, the floor shattered. It was an explosion as if struck from below. Something must have flown from the arena.

One of the barrels growing from the Mist Dragon’s back had blasted about a third of

the VIP floor into splinters.

There was nothing to do but stand there agape; the three of us lost our words. Lina, in particular, looked like she didn't understand what had happened. It was only because I had the knowledge. The Mist Dragon can eject bullets produced inside its body from those barrels. One of those bullets had been fired, and it had happened to destroy the floor. The Mist Dragon was expressionless, but it seemed to be irritated by the unknown world; I could hear the turbine noise getting louder and louder.

"For now... just so you know, if you get hit by that, you'll be obliterated."

Among the three of us standing in silence, the Mist Dragon increased its turbine hum at its own pace. Lina continued in an even flatter, deadpan voice.

"That’s a lovely melody you’ve got there."

Voim, who had been dazed until then, spun around and struck a pose.

"And as for my power—"

"I realized the other day that servants who just obey are meaningless."

"Servants who *don't* obey are even more meaningless!"

Lina delivered a kick to him immediately.

"Hieeeee!"

Voim fell over just as the Mist Dragon began a simultaneous volley. It was an indiscriminate bombardment with no aim whatsoever. The spectator stands in all directions were shattered into powder one after another.

Judging it was better than staying here, I grabbed the fallen Voim by the collar and dragged the god-ish thing as I jumped behind the VIP seating. Considering the Mist Dragon’s destructive power, it probably wouldn't even buy us time. I shouted the obvious amidst the roar of the cannons.

"If this hits you, well, it’s basically gonna go exactly how you’d expect!"

Lina also dove into the same cover. The black dragon in the sky, perhaps seeing the Mist Dragon as an enemy, blew that black breath from earlier toward the center of the arena. The breath caused a portion of the arena and the ground to vanish,

creating a crater.

"Roger that!"

The bombardment didn't end; the arena continued to lose its original shape. The Mist Dragon’s atmospheric magic created a gale, fueling the chaos. It was likely trying to seal the movement of the dragon flying in the sky. The turbine noise grew even stronger than before.

Lina shouted as if horrified. She was right next to me, but the force of the gale was increasing so much that I couldn't hear her unless she yelled.

"What is up with the dragons from your place!?"

"They’re basically wandering disasters! Their annual damage alone pressures the national treasury!"

The Mist Dragon is the species that has the most frequent contact with the Human Race. Even if you don't want to make contact, there is no way to stop this dragon's progress. It is a disaster in the truest sense.

While the gale buffeted its wings, the black dragon did not fall but gained altitude, firing its breath at random. Every time the black torrent touched something, city buildings vanished, leaving deep chasms in the ground. The Mist Dragon’s lightning was released again. It was sucked into the clouds, and this time, lightning poured down from the storm clouds to the ground in rapid succession. In the electrified void, while being swarmed by light, the black dragon’s attacks continued. Every time the breath of nothingness drew a ribbon in the air, the air in that area vanished, further agitating the air currents and playing a symphony of explosions.

"But that black dragon is getting pretty serious too... At that altitude, Sound Magic isn't likely to reach it."

As I muttered while looking up at the monster in the sky, Lina shouted at me. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Then you take care of that dragon, Orphen! I’ll do something about this one!"

For a second, I didn't understand what she was saying, and I started to repeat it.

"No, wait, 'take care of it'—"

"Do your best!"

But Lina wouldn't even allow that; she threw the words over her shoulder and ran out from the cover along the spectator seats. She was glaring up at the sky, seemingly chanting a spell, but it was drowned out by the noise and I couldn't hear it.

"Uh..."

I watched her go and then, for a moment, peered at the Mist Dragon. I poked my head out slightly from the shadow of the destroyed VIP box. I stared at the monster scattering bullets from the arena, indifferent to the breath of nothingness being blown at it, for exactly two seconds before letting out a weak laugh.

"Even if you tell me to do my best..."

I quickly pulled my head back just as a bullet blew that spot away. I grabbed Voim, who was still sprawled at my feet, and pulled him close to my face.

"Can our spells even reach those dragons?"

"N-No, I haven't put up any protection, de-gozaru."

Whether he was still dizzy or not, his speech was a mess, but I was satisfied with the answer for now and nodded. I left Voim there, took a deep breath, and unified my consciousness.

(Well then... let’s try it the Master's way.)

Lina had already run quite a distance away. Judging from past experience, the spell she was chanting would take ten to fifteen seconds. It wouldn't be a small spell to "do something about" the dragon in the sky, so it was likely a grand technique close to her longest. I intended to utilize that timing.

Even with Voim’s permission, I only had one or two spells in mind that would work on a Mist Dragon. Both had a low success rate, but I had to bet on them. And to increase the success rate even slightly, I needed to close the distance to narrow the magic's effect.

"I sing—"

I stuck only my hand out from the cover and touched the walkway of the spectator seats.

"The Sacred Sound of Destruction!"

First was the Self-Destruction Chain. It traveled from my fingertips into the floor, and a tsunami of destruction scraped away the spectator seats. I leaped out from the VIP box and stepped into the wake of that destruction; the floor, having lost its substance and shattered, collapsed all at once. I hid myself in the makeshift trench created by the magic and ran at full speed toward the arena. The hole wasn't that deep, but if I ran crouching, I could somehow block the bullets. I made the trench winding so as to stay in the Mist Dragon’s blind spot. Counting the seconds in my head, I ran single-mindedly through the sound of explosions.

(It should be about time...)

Just as I reached the edge of the arena, the chance came. Lina’s voice, ringing exceptionally high, sliced through the noise. A red radiance stretching from behind the spectator wall pierced the lightning and touched the black dragon. The sensation of an explosion overwhelmed the sky in an instant.

"Dragon Slave!"

The sky sucked in its breath. The Mist Dragon looked upward. When the Mist Dragon’s head pointed at the sky, the barrels fixed to its back pointed behind it at the ground. I read that even if the bombardment didn't stop, there would be a split-second opening behind the Mist Dragon.

I leaped out of the trench. I fixed my eyes on the Mist Dragon’s back and thrust out both hands. This was not the end. Once I cast a high-difficulty spell, I had to finish it. If the Mist Dragon regained its posture, I would most likely be blown to bits.

"By my contract, let the Holy War end!"

Even if I failed, there was no redo. Meaning Extinction ignores the opponent's strength or mentality and simply makes the meaning of their existence cease. It isn't as destructive or fatal as mental control, but in exchange, it works indiscriminately on anything that exists. It was one of my trump cards. The difficulty of the composition was on a different level, and the success rate was low...

But. At that split second, the sky exploded.

It was likely due to Lina’s spell. The dragon’s massive body was effortlessly blasted apart, raining fire and ash over the area. It was a spell I had seen before, but its power seemed to overturn common sense every time I saw it. A thermal power that

looked capable of blowing away even the storm clouds left behind an atmospheric surge that resembled a dragon's roar. The explosion, which left almost not a single piece of the dragon's body, transformed from a giant fireball into a dry wind, losing its force. As if it had sucked in and taken away the entire disturbance, silence fell over the area.

On the ground, the Mist Dragon had also gone quiet. Sitting down on the spot, I let out a sigh of relief. I muttered with a somewhat reckless heart.

".....I didn't think that would actually work."

The effective range of Meaning Extinction had, as intended, erased the steam tower and the barrels on the Mist Dragon’s back. As if nothing had happened, the Mist Dragon lumbered away from the arena with an air of indifference.

In just a short time, the entire area had been devastated—completely destroyed by the two monsters. I stood up and looked up at the VIP box, half of which remained. While I was slowly heading back, Lina returned as well.

Voim, who had recovered, stood alone with his hands on his hips and nodded grandly.

"What do you mean 'What'!!?"

I shouted as I ran toward him from a distance. Lina looked at Voim with a gaze that was utterly fixed.

".....I brought it out. I took care of it. Are we done now?"

Voim hurriedly waved his hand at her.

"No, no, no! Wait! I mean, that was no good! I was basically against it from the start. What am I supposed to do with a giant monster like that?"

"Hoh. You were against it. I didn't notice that at all."

Finally reaching the spot, I joined in while groaning.

"I mean, I wanted *you* to do something about it!"

Because I had passed through the tunnel I destroyed with the Self-Destruction Chain, my entire body was covered in dust. As I brushed it off, Lina said casually:

"But you did it, didn't you?"

She acted as if it were nothing from beginning to end.

"No, impossible. Normally you'd die doing that. It'll never succeed a second time."

I spoke from the bottom of my heart. Only a legendary sorcerer would successfully pull off such an outrageous feat as a matter of course. Like my Master, or other great practitioners. Or, like this girl in front of me.

I turned tired eyes toward Voim and asked. In the first place, this man himself was difficult enough to talk to. I wondered what "someone you can talk to" would even look like to a guy like this.

Whether he knew my inner thoughts or not, Voim nodded.

"That's right... a warrior. Uhm. Strong warriors. Someone overflowing with fighting spirit would be good."

"Fighting spirit, huh."

Whether he was tired from the series of disturbances or just lacked motivation, Orphen also muttered somewhat dismissively. At any rate, we wouldn't be allowed back to our original worlds unless we produced something. If so, it was best to get this over with quickly.

Thinking that, Lina searched among the people she had met for someone she could actually talk to—searched... and searched...

"Are they expensive!?"

Voim's question caused Lina to give a weary, immediate reply.

"The hurdle of 'someone you can talk to' is high enough already, and on top of that, a warrior..."

I felt the same way—

"That's a nearly impossible request."

It seemed we were in a similar situation. Considering the trans-dimensional butler of Orphen's acquaintance that Lina had met before, it wasn't hard to understand.

Voim twisted the corner of his mouth.

"Uhm..... Your world is occasionally incomprehensible. Regardless! If that is your wish, it cannot be helped. Now, imagine! Call forth a warrior! A warrior!"

Lina and I both tilted our heads.

"Hmm. A warrior... fighting spirit... basically indiscriminate... maybe that one..."

"A warrior, huh... Come to think of it, there was someone like that..."

Almost at the same moment we muttered.

"I got it—!"

Voim let out a strange cry and started thrashing his limbs like an insect that had hot water poured on it. Even knowing that was the voice and motion of summoning, he looked like he'd completely lost his marbles.

At the same time, a shadow blurred onto the floor a short distance away. The shadow gained a sharp outline and began to heave and struggle before our eyes.

It was exactly the same as when the dragons appeared earlier, though the scale was different. One clump divided into two, materializing two human figures!

From the very moment they appeared, the two women were facing off. One was the woman Lina had envisioned.

She looked to be around twenty. With long black hair fluttering in the wind, she stared intently at her opponent.

The other was undoubtedly the person I had brought to mind. A face Lina didn't know. Thirty or thereabouts. Her rather small frame was covered in well-trained muscle, and in her hand was a sharp, streamlined object.

It was a weapon Lina had never seen before. The tip, filled with a lethal intent, was as thin and sharp as a rapier; the underside of the streamlined shape reflected silver light, and the top was made of black iron.

A dull glint reflected off the iron. Numerous sharp protrusions were set at key points, looking as though they were designed specifically to snag and snap an opponent's weapon.

The woman held the weapon without an opening, aiming it toward the black-haired woman.

"Hmph... Name yourself. If you’re going to surrender, I won't be needing the name of a coward."

The black-haired woman’s eyes narrowed. Perhaps her emotions were stirred by the provocation, or perhaps she was merely interested in the unfamiliar weapon. "Unfamiliar"—though that was strictly in the sense of its use as a weapon. If one removed the category of "armament," even Lina had seen it before.

A blue marlin. Distributed in warm seas. Delicious when eaten.

But—Lina knew. If one underestimated this as a mere tuna, they would be in for a world of hurt. While tuna belong to the Scombridae family, marlins belong to the Istiophoridae or Xiphiidae family; they are entirely different fish! If asked "So what?" she would have been at a loss for an answer, though!

"That tuna... I see it is a masterpiece. I want it."

Ecstasy.

Lemy’s eyes changed color as they reflected in the mirror-like cross-section of a stone pillar. But it wasn't astonishment or fear; it was simply—

"Fish are a warrior's soul... If you want it, you’ll have to kill me for it."

"In that case... as you wish!"

The silver fish parried the slash of the silver blade as it rushed across the ground!

Whether she judged it impossible to take the returning blow of the blue marlin, or simply hated the idea of damaging her weapon, Lemy dodged by a hair's breadth with perfect reading!

At a battle that far surpassed human understanding, the god-ish thing blinked two or three times.

"Might I ask both of you... what exactly that is?"

"They’ve got plenty of fighting spirit, don't they?"

I gave a confident answer, and Voim turned his eyes once more toward the guardian

candidates. Amidst the intensifying offense and defense, fearless smiles played across the women's faces.

"A rigged tuna? Well, fine. Cutting down an opponent who doesn't even hold a blade is... ufu... unfufu... it has its own charm..."

The black-haired woman let out a suppressed chuckle as she drew an exotic longsword from her back—one of several, no, a dozen blades she wore across her body.

"Lemy Martin. As you can see, I am one who lives by the blade."

"I wonder about that..."

"Hah! As expected of the fastest class of fish! However!"

"Not bad! To think you'd trade blows with a marlin using mere cutlery!"

Was it a provocation or something else? Even as they exchanged words, the two streaks of silver light crossed countless times. Though there was a difference between fish and blade, as long as each strike was imbued with lethal technique and will, there was no gap between them.

The opposing woman swung her blue marlin with a speed that wouldn't even permit the sight of an afterimage. At the signal of the sound of the air being sliced open, a nearby stone pillar slid down diagonally, echoing with a heavy thud.

"Innate Synthesis Practical Combat Martial Arts, Ishin Warrior Group SSW... Meteor Special Attack Girl, Ianna. One-Sword Marlin Style."

Lina, watching them, nodded slowly with satisfaction. "See? She's a mad dog that fits the criteria perfectly."

"No. I mean, look."

Without even turning toward Voim, who was trying to say something, I watched the battle alongside Lina.

"Oh. They’re starting to use secret techniques. 'Tuna Mincemeat Slash.' Sounds like a recipe."

"Ah. Impressive, impressive. By the way, is it about time we went home?"

"Whaaaaaaa!"

As expected, Voim let out a scream. With slightly teary eyes, he cried out:

"Something is wrong, isn't it?! Making a resident of such a unique world a guardian—what kind of paradise would that be? That space alone is already a different world!"

I looked sullen at his words, while Lina wore an expression of surprise.

"Even if you say that, they're exactly as you ordered..."

"What?! Where is the dissatisfaction?! They may look like that, but they’re good people, if you subtract the parts about common sense and conscience—"

"If you subtract those from a good person, is *that* what you get?! No, wait. I said a partner I could talk to. It is not enough to merely have linguistic ability. Those monsters from earlier were easier to approach than this! Umu. Yes. I never liked boorish things like 'warriors' from the start!"

"Even though you were the one who brought up warriors first... I guess there's no point in pointing that out... If you mean someone you can talk to..."

Lina abandoned her retort halfway and thought.

"Let’s see... like a timid young man surrounded by yakuza?"

"What is he supposed to protect?! It should be someone who listens to requests! That is the ideal guardian!"

At the troublesome request, Lina looked over, and I crossed my arms.

"Requests... Hmm. Well, I might have someone in mind."

"Yes, yes, that's it!"

"Listening to requests... I see!"

Lina’s thoughts reacted to that keyword. She clapped her hands together reflexively.

"I’ve got one too!"

"Oh! Imagine them!"

By now a familiar sight, the world responded to Voim's strange cry and mysterious dance.

Slightly to the side of where the blade and the fish were unfolding their fierce battle, shadows rose again and created two humans.

One was a woman. Lina did not know the woman I had imagined. But—why was it? The moment she laid eyes on her, she thought, *Oh, it's a "hopeless person."*

It wasn't that she was dressed strangely. The large star mark on her cloak was a bit "out there," but it was within the range of tolerance. Her actions, looking around restlessly, seemed more dim-witted than gentle, but there are many such people in the world. In any case, normally, one would just settle on the thought: *Well, people like that exist, right?*

However. Lina's "hopeless person sensor," honed by meeting and parting with countless such individuals, was shouting clearly: *This one is hopeless!!*

The woman looked around at the devastation, suddenly clutched her head, and moved her feet in a flurry.

"T-This place... I can't think of a place more terribly dire than this! I must do something!"

After shouting what was either a declaration or a monologue, she began sweeping the courtyard with a broom she produced from nowhere. Along the way, she accidentally stepped on the person Lina had imagined—the partner who would listen to any request: a charred thief who was barely breathing.

The stepped-on thief twitched violently, yet managed to gasp out between ragged breaths:

".....I'll... tell you... anything..... KEND....."

Hearing those words, Lina looked at Voim triumphantly.

"See? He says he'll tell you anything."

"Is your idea of a 'request' just handing over money and valuables?!"

"Wait, no? There are other things, like 'Tell me where your hideout is ♪' or 'Tell me the composition of that spell ♪' and so on."

"Those are also impossible demands, or rather—"

"But look. Is it right to expect anything more from a partner in this state?"

Whether convinced by Lina’s logic or having given up on something, Voim looked on in silence as Lassie, seeing the thief she had stepped on writhing in pain, gasped softly.

"That's right... I got the order of things to do first all wrong....."

Finally realizing her mistake, she first moved the thief out of the way to a corner, and then began sweeping the courtyard. It was the same principle as taking a bath: shampoo before washing the body so the dirt flows downward.

However, this also seemed to dissatisfy him. Voim flailed his limbs as he cried:

"Eh, that’s not it! In the first place, didn't I say from the start that there was no need to have requests listened to?! Yes..... what a guardian needs is the loyalty to carry out orders!"

"Loyalty—"

"—you say!"

Eyes met. In that moment, the hearts of Lina and Orphen became one! Sensing a response like never before, Voim summoned it!

The next moment. The four eyes that appeared were filled with absolute devotion toward the god-ish thing of this world. Two abandoned puppies trembled as they looked at Voim with gazes that seemed to cling to him, letting out little whines from their throats!

"I shall no longer offer retorts..."

"Don't look at me with those eyes!"

Voim desperately tore his gaze away from the puppies and glared at Lina and me.

"That's not it, is it?! In the first place, I have always said that there are things far more important for a guardian than loyalty!"

"Yeah, yeah. So what is it?"

Facing the two of us, who were now completely dismissive, Voim still puffed out his

chest.

"What a guardian needs is to rush to my side from whenever, wherever—"

I cut in immediately.

"An arrow message?"

"Why!?"

Lina didn't miss her chance either.

"A debt collector!"

"I haven't borrowed anything!? Something is wrong here! What a guardian needs is someone who is usually quiet but gets the job done surely when the time comes, like a professional assassin—"

"A waitress?"

"An anemone?"

"Pufferfish stew?"

"No, no, what a guardian needs is—"

"A goat."

"A tapir."

"What a guardian needs—"

"A set square." "A tangerine."

"To a guardian—"

"Tom-kun." "Catherine."

"What a guardian needs—"

The world is always beautiful.

There are times when people lose sight of that beauty. But that is merely a momentary lapse of the mind. No matter the circumstances, everything in the world

is built upon a single, consistent, beautiful law.

Precisely because of that.

Even if the Keega head was thrashing about and turning everything into rubble, and there was a charred person in the corner, and a fish-maniac and a blade-maniac were still fighting, and a waitress was starting to make rice porridge in a hot pot, and there was a withered loofah, and a school lunch bread that had been in an absent student's desk for a month, and a person was sweeping them all up while shouting something in a flurry—even so, this world is beautiful.

Lina argued that point with great emphasis.

"I think we did our best."

Lina nodded deeply, as if gazing at the setting sun. I also looked toward the same sky.

"Sometimes, effort doesn't feel all that refreshing, does it?"

"But look, we should be able to puff out our chests at the results we reached after repeated consideration."

"I guess so. Even the god-ish thing said, 'No, it's fine. It's enough already.'"

"'You've already done enough.' That's what those words meant, right?"

"And so!"

Our voices harmonized as we turned back toward Voim.

"We're going home now!"

"Umu..."

With his gaze lowered, Voim muttered.

The parting was the same as before. If Voim were to look up now, the guests from another world would already be fading away.

Lina said the world is always beautiful. I have no objection to that. This world, created in pursuit of perfection, was indeed so.

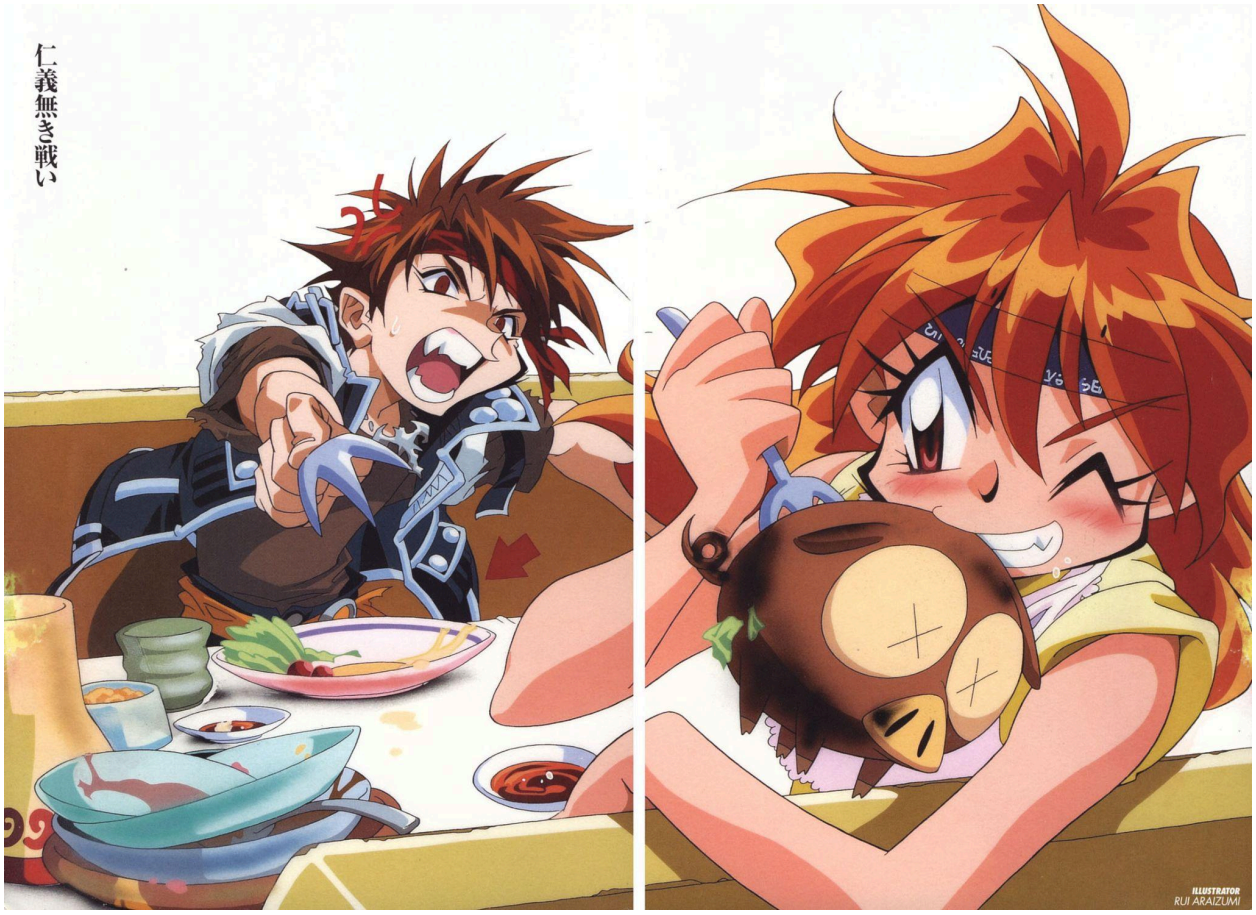
But why was it? Why did it feel like tears would spill if I let my guard down?

In a world where the presence of the guests had already vanished, while being watched by the teary eyes of two abandoned dogs, the god-ish thing stared forever and ever at the manju and the dark tea placed before his knees—

End.

ILLUSTRATOR
RUI ARAIZUMI & YUUYA KUSAKA
史上最悪の出会い!?

仁義無き戦い



ILLUSTRATOR
RUI ARAIZUMI

【第一章】邂逅

【第二章】
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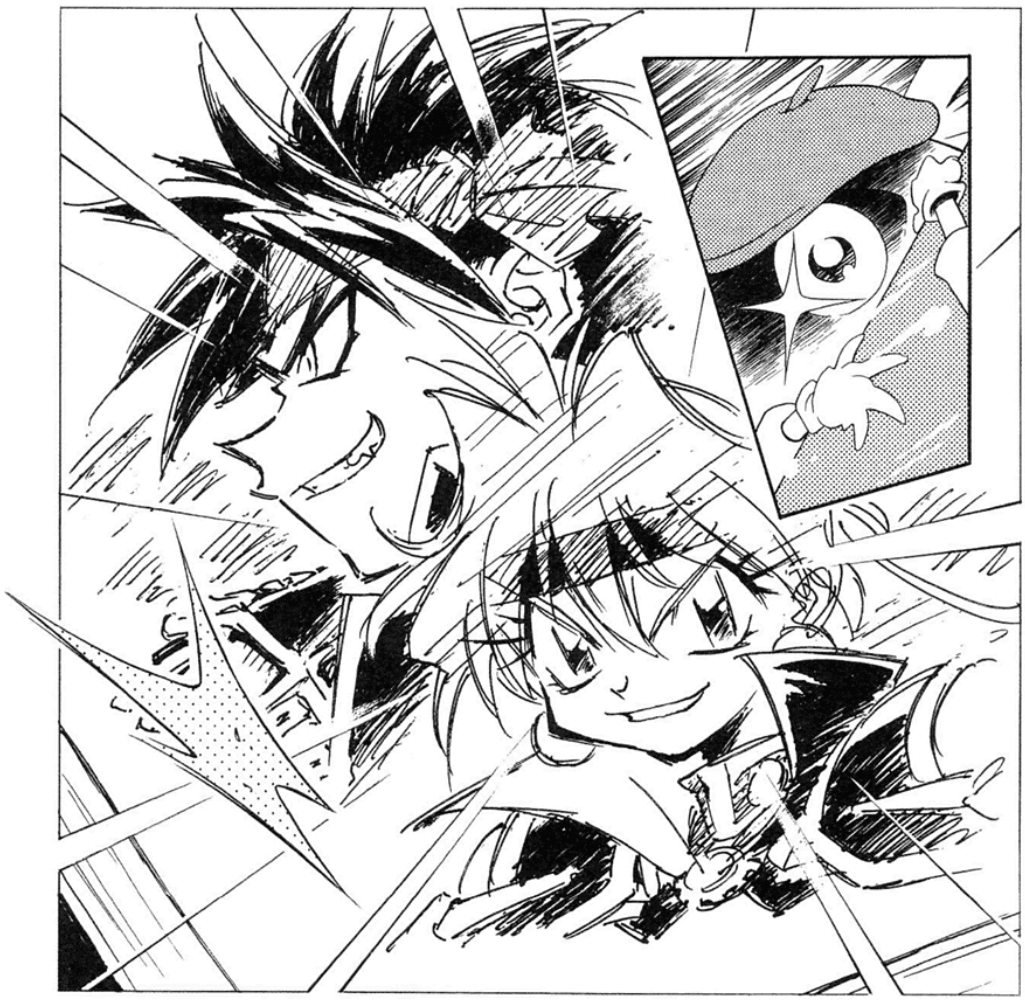

【第三章】トリックスターズ

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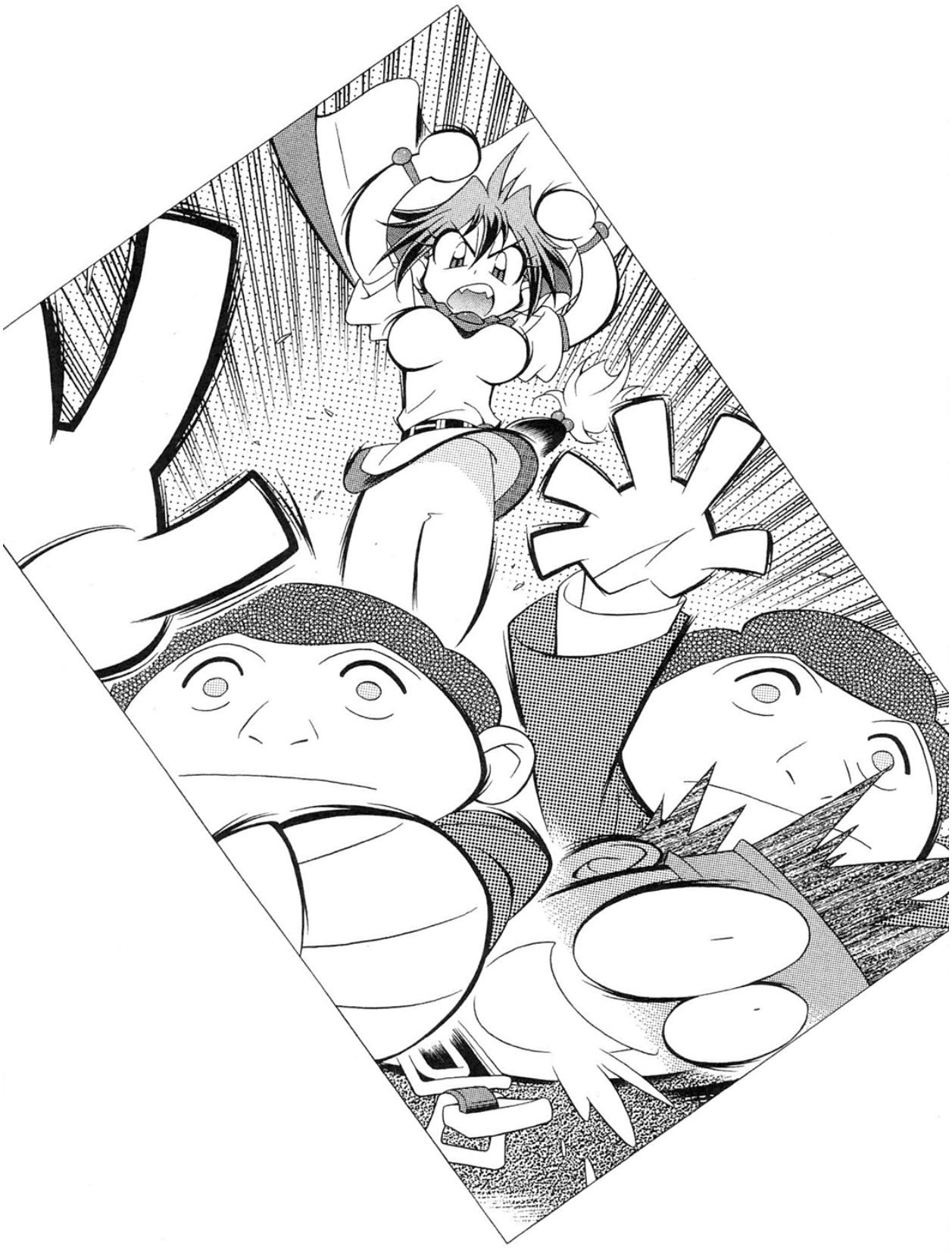
【第四章】
屈辱



【第五章】
究極住人

最強
合体

オギャー

【番外編】
ぽいものランド